

A man in a black tuxedo and a woman in a yellow gown are dancing in a grand hall. The woman is looking up at the man, and he is looking down at her. The background shows a large chandelier and ornate architecture.

*The  
Townsbridge's  
Series*

A DUKE FOR  
*Miss Townsbridge*  
*A Townsbridge Romance*

SOPHIE  
BARNES

# A Duke for Miss Townsbridge

The Townsbridges, Volume 4

Sophie Barnes

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A DUKE FOR MISS TOWNSBRIDGE

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Written by Sophie Barnes.

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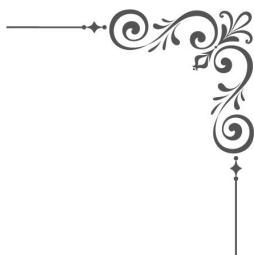
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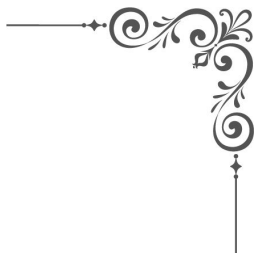
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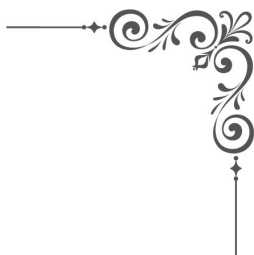
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# Chapter One

IT WAS THE PERFECT day for an outdoor activity.

Just not this particular sort of outdoor activity.

Gripping her glass of lemonade as if her sanity depended on not letting the fine crystal slip between her fingers, Sarah Townsbridge tried to focus on what Mr. Hastings was saying. Something about how he'd once helped one of his tenants fix a broken plough – an account that could have been entertaining had he not veered off into a technical description comprising long lists of very confusing terms.

She nodded politely to feign an interest.

Her brother, William, had only just gotten married two days earlier, and already her mother had managed to pool together an astounding number of bachelors. It was what she'd threatened to do several weeks ago – before William's return from Portugal. With her eldest sons, Charles and James, already settled and Will far away, Sarah's mother had set her sights on her eldest daughter next.

But then, as if Lady Luck herself had smiled upon Sarah, Will had returned and quickly snatched all attention away from her by courting their mother's new cook. The reprieve had been short lived however, and now the garden was filled with a wide array of gentlemen who seemed to have been let loose for her amusement.

It was without a doubt the most embarrassing experience of her life. Made more so a short while later when Viscount Belmont decided to ask who else might be coming.

"No one," she said, her cheeks hot with mortification. "At least, not as far as I know."

"I see." Seemingly uncertain of whether to apologize for his blunder or try to pretend he'd not just insulted her, Belmont looked askance. "The weather is certainly fine this time of year."

"Indeed it is." Sarah offered a smile while thinking of all the ways in which she'd like to kill her mother.

"The sun is shining and the sky is blue." Belmont returned his

attention to Sarah. "It's quite pleasant."

She ground her teeth. "Indeed."

"Sarah, dear," her mother said as she strolled up with the sort of relaxed posture that only intensified Sarah's murderous thoughts, "have you met the Earl of Penwood yet?"

"Yes. I do believe I've met everyone."

"There's also the Earl of Endry," her mother said. "Perhaps if you will excuse us a moment, Lord Belmont?"

"Of course." The earl practically sagged with relief.

Sarah glanced at her mother's neck while the woman steered her away. How hard would it be to strangle her? "This is the worst event you've ever planned."

"There's also Mr. Cummings and Mr. Dunnings," Mama said, clearly ignoring Sarah's complaint.

"Am I your least favorite child? Is that why you've chosen to torture me this way?"

"Nonsense, dearest. I love all my children equally. You know that."

Sarah did know that. She also knew it was why her mother was making her go through this horrid ordeal. Because she wanted Sarah to find the same happiness she'd shared with her husband - the sort Sarah's brothers had all been blessed with in recent years.

With a sigh, she allowed her eager mother to lead her across the grass to where the aforementioned gentlemen had gathered. Like a lamb to the slaughter. "Honestly, Mama. I'm not sure your method is very effective."

Mama drew to a halt and faced her. "Perhaps not, Sarah. But with six failed Seasons behind us, what else am I supposed to do? The time for you to marry is swiftly running out."

It was a fair point. Especially since Sarah did not want to be a spinster. She desired a husband and children of her own - lots of them actually since her dreams for the future included a home similar to the one she'd been raised in. She wished for the sort of relationship her parents enjoyed - the closeness her brothers had found with their wives. In short, she wanted a love match which, as it turned out, wasn't something one simply went out and found. Lord knew she'd tried. And given up. So here she was, two and twenty years old and well on her way to becoming an ape leader.

Sarah took a deep breath. Maybe Mama's idea wasn't too terrible. It certainly deserved thought. And there were a few gentlemen here with whom she'd never before conversed at great length. Perhaps she should make more of an effort to further her acquaintance with them.

"Remember," her mother added while they walked across the grass. "All of these men are here to see you. This is your chance to shine."



“Very well.” Sarah forced a smile as they approached the group of bachelors.

“Lord Penwood and Lord Endry,” Mama said with spirited gusto. “Mr. Cummings and Mr. Dunnings. I thought I’d bring Miss Townsbridge over here for a bit so you can get to know her better.”

“What an excellent idea,” Lord Endry said. At the same height as Sarah, he wasn’t imposing or even especially handsome, but his eyes were kind and his smile looked genuine. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about your interests.”

“I, um...oh.” Sarah cleared her throat and regarded the four expectant faces before her. “I am particularly fond of outdoor games like pall mall and shuttlecock. When I’m in the countryside, I like to fish.”

“Truly?” Mr. Dunnings asked with a keen degree of interest.

She shrugged one shoulder. “I find it relaxing.”

“I know a great spot just outside of London,” Mr. Dunnings said. “I would be honored to take you one day.”

“What about riding?” Lord Penwood inquired before Sarah had a chance to accept Mr. Dunnings’s offer.

“Certainly,” Sarah agreed. She glanced at them each in turn. “I love to ride.”

Satisfied murmurs followed and then Lord Endry asked, “Perhaps you would allow me to take you out in my curricule tomorrow?”

“Well yes,” Sarah said, both startled and a bit overwhelmed by these men’s keenness. “That would be—”

“Now, now,” Mr. Dunnings said with a sly grin. “I did mention fishing first. You’ll have to get in line, Lord Endry.”

Sarah blinked. She couldn’t quite believe what was happening. For the first time since she’d made her debut at the age of sixteen, men were making an effort to get to know her. More than that, they were starting to compete for the chance to take her out.

She glanced at her mother, who practically beamed with pleasure.

“I rather fancy a good book,” Lord Penwood remarked. “Do you have a penchant for literature, Miss Townsbridge?”

“Indeed I do. I’m currently reading *The Memoires of Benjamin Franklin*.”

“Are you really?” Lord Penwood looked both surprised and satisfied. “I like that. Shows a desire to read for more than pleasure alone. Do you know, I’m not sure why we’ve never spoken before, but I’m certainly glad I accepted your mother’s invitation. Perhaps we can —”

“I say,” Mr. Cummings declared. “Who is that?”

Everyone turned.

“Dear me,” Sarah’s mother murmured in response to the tall figure

talking toward them as though he was on a crusade of some sort.

"It can't be," Sarah said. "Did you invite him?"

"That," Lord Penwood said in answer to Cummings's question, "would appear to be the Duke of Brunswick."

Sarah clenched her jaw. Brunswick had bought the house next door years ago, but whenever Mama had invited him to join them for dinner or to take tea, he'd not even deigned a response. He was the very personification of pure arrogance - the sort of man who looked down his nose at those who ranked lower than he. Which included most of England.

"I didn't even think to include him," Mama murmured while Brunswick drew ever nearer.

Of course she wouldn't have. Perhaps that was why he'd shown up? Because he felt overlooked? Sarah stared at him, attempting to gauge his motive. Tall and lean with almost black hair matching the shade of his eyes, an angular jaw, and a perfectly shaped nose—if that were even a thing—he was without doubt one of the most striking men Sarah had ever seen. He might even have been the handsomest if not for the slightly condescending tilt of his lips.

This was the sort of man who believed he was better than everyone else - who was sure he could have whatever his heart desired. All he need do was snap his fingers and his every wish would come true. And yet, even as she made this assessment, Sarah noticed a slightly haunted look about him. Mostly in the vicinity of his eyes.

She shook herself. It had to be a trick of the light.

He halted a few feet from where she stood. Utterly serious, with his mouth pressed into a firm line of pure determination, he met her gaze. Sarah's heart began racing. Something wasn't right. He'd no cause to be here. What on earth could he possibly want?

The answer to this question became clear within the next second when he dropped to one knee. Sarah's mother gasped and Sarah almost leapt to Brunswick's aid, certain he must have suffered some sort of seizure. It was the only thing that made sense until he looked up and she noticed he was holding a ring.

*What. On. Earth?*

"Marry me."

No declaration of love, no explanation for why he'd chosen to pose such an impromptu question to someone he'd never even been introduced to. Just a demand.

Indignation poured through her until she fairly shook with an almost mad desire to fall on him like some enraged harpy and pummel him until he cried for mercy. Thus far, this had been the most humiliating day of her life, but until this precise moment, she'd still been able to chalk it up to one of those things one simply forgot and

moved past.

Well, there was no moving past a kneeling duke. By the time the last guest departed, word would already have spread to every corner of every parlor in London, mostly because of what she knew she would say. There wasn't a choice.

Best get it over and done with then.

"No."

Her mother gasped again. The other gentlemen went so still Sarah could actually feel their shocked expressions upon her skin.

Brunswick blinked. "I said, marry me."

As if the disaster warranted repeating. Good lord. Perhaps she should try a different response.

"No, thank you," she said. That was really the extent of what she could manage right now in terms of politeness. When Brunswick remained where he was, still holding his ring forth like some sort of trophy he'd won in a joust, Sarah turned to her mother. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I completely understand," her mother said, frowning at the duke.

Determined to ignore him, Sarah addressed the other gentlemen present. "Thank you so much for coming. I'm much obliged to all of you for taking time out of your busy schedules in order to be here. Shall I expect to go fishing with you tomorrow Mr. Dunnings, or am I to ride with you in your curricule, Lord Endry? I'm not entirely sure we agreed on when I'd be seeing whom."

"Ah..." Mr. Dummings said, sounding much like a man getting strangled. "Now that I think of it, I do believe I have some business that will take me out of Town for a while."

"Me too," Lord Endry quipped, to which Mr. Cummings and Lord Penwood hastily nodded as if they too intended to make themselves scarce for a while.

Sarah stared at them all as realization dawned. The spectacle Brunswick had caused, coupled with her act of publically turning him down, had made the other men re-think their interest.

"In that case, I bid you good day," she told them curtly. Her only goal now was to escape the humiliation. And so she hurried away, without a backward glance to check if Brunswick was still on bended knee in the grass.



MATTHEW STARED AFTER Miss Townsbridge in baffled astonishment. She'd rejected him. A duke. The most desirable option available on the marriage mart.

For years he'd had to fend off debutantes and their mamas. And that was without taking into account the widows looking to aim a bit

higher on their next trip to the altar.

“Would you like a hand, Your Grace?”

Matthew glanced at the young man offering assistance. He wasn't the only one staring. A small crowd of onlookers jostled each other for a good look at the man who'd failed to secure the hand of a woman who ought to be thrilled with his offer.

“That won't be necessary.” Irritated, he rose. Every gentleman here had been invited to vie for Miss Townsbridge's hand. When Matthew had realized what was going on – that a very deliberate effort was underway to marry her off – he'd made a snap decision to snatch her up before anyone else had the chance.

It never once occurred to him that he might not succeed. And yet here he stood. Rejected.

“Perhaps you'd like some lemonade?” a footman inquired.

Only if it was spiked with brandy. Matthew scowled at the servant until the smile slipped from his face and he retreated.

“May I please have a word with you?” a woman asked.

Swinging around, Matthew dropped his gaze until he located Viscountess Roxley. “About what?”

She leveled him a dry look. “Your offer, of course. My husband will want to meet with you to discuss the terms.”

“But–”

“In the future, it might serve you well to treat people with the sort of respect you expect in return. After all, one never knows when a slight may come back to haunt you. This way.”

Lady Roxley swept past him with the regalness of a queen. Matthew stared after her a moment, glanced at the other gentlemen milling about, and decided to follow.

“Simmons,” Lady Roxley told the butler who'd admitted Matthew when he'd arrived, “please make sure the other gentlemen are shown out in an orderly fashion. Once they've gone, you may ask my husband to find me in the parlor. Come along, Your Grace.”

She ushered Matthew into a neat room with stylish yet comfortable looking furniture and gestured toward an armchair. “Please have a seat while I fix us each a drink.”

“While the request you've made for our daughter's hand is greatly appreciated,” Lord Roxley said some fifteen minutes later after his wife had apprised him of the situation, “I'm not sure I understand the manner in which you chose to go about it. Or your reason for acting so rashly. As far as I know, you've never shown any member of this family much interest before, even though you've resided next door to us for...well, it must be about ten years by now.”

“I prefer to keep to myself,” Matthew said.

“I see. And will this preference of yours continue after you've

married our daughter?"

Matthew frowned. "I don't intend to keep her locked up, if that's what you're asking."

"Dear me, I should hope not," Lady Roxley muttered. She took a sip from the generous glass of brandy she'd served herself earlier.

"Naturally, you will be welcome in our home," Matthew said in the hope of squashing this strange concern. "She is your daughter, after all. If you'd like a gate in the fence between our properties, that can be arranged too."

"Really?" Lady Roxley didn't sound the least bit convinced.

Matthew sighed and decided it was time for a very large gulp of brandy. He savored the heat and spicy flavor along with the soothing languor that followed. "I'm not a horrible person. If I've given that impression by not accepting your invitations over the years, then I apologize. Truth is, I have a select group of friends I favor." When Lord Roxley merely raised an eyebrow, Matthew said, "I've been watching your daughter a great deal lately."

An immediate frown appeared on the viscount's forehead. "I beg your pardon?"

And so he should. Somehow, the statement, once spoken out loud, did not sound as complimentary as Matthew imagined it would. Rather, it portrayed him as some sort of lurking lecher with ulterior motives.

He decided to try again. "Two years ago, when I began considering marriage, I started taking greater note of the available ladies. After much consideration and having dismissed almost every potential candidate, I concluded that your daughter, Miss Townsbridge, would make me the perfect wife and duchess."

"And you concluded this when, exactly?" Lord Roxley asked.

"Earlier today." When both parents gaped at him as if he were daft, he added, "When I realized I might lose my chance. Hence the hasty proposal."

"Of course," Lady Roxley managed. She took another sip of her drink before handing the glass to her husband, who took several gulps. "That explains everything."

"I think so," Matthew agreed. He'd surveyed his options and after extensive consideration, he'd picked the best one - a sensible woman who turned down sugary treats and liked to take long walks. Miss Townsbridge had an abundance of energy, which would be put to good use when it came to raising his children. Also, her looks were pleasing enough that bedding her wouldn't prove any particular hardship. But most importantly, she was an introvert - the quiet sort who liked to be alone with her thoughts, which meant she would be content by herself, which *also* meant there would be no chance of

their becoming attached to each other or, God forbid, falling in love. For that to occur, they would have to spend time together, enjoy common interests, forge an unbreakable bond.

He'd gouge out his own damn eyes before he allowed that to happen.

But since he doubted her parents would appreciate hearing about his plan to spend no more time with his wife than what was required in order to successfully procreate, he decided to spare them those details. Instead, he said, "As I understand it, most young ladies aspire to marry well. Indeed, I have been chased and harassed for years by women hoping to take my name and title. In marrying me, your daughter will be well looked after. My intention is to bestow a yearly allowance of one thousand pounds upon her, to do with as she pleases. Aside from this, she may choose to divide her time between any one of my four estates, renovating them to her heart's desire, or simply enjoying the pleasure of hosting extravagant parties. In short, she'll never want for anything."

Lady Roxley narrowed her gaze upon him then. "What about happiness?"

"Happiness?" Matthew spoke the word as if it were poisoned. Christ. The emotion was so damn foreign to him, it felt like it belonged in a dream he'd once had as a child. Shuddering, he looked the viscountess squarely in the eye. "I'll do my best."

She stared at him with unflinching scrutiny. "It won't be enough. Whatever it is you have in mind for Sarah, it won't be enough. Not without love."

And there it was. The one thing he couldn't provide. "She will have children and security along with one of England's most prestigious titles. The world will be at her feet. Just think of all the good she can do with her influence."

"We will certainly pass these points along to her," Lord Roxley said, "but we have no intention of trying to push her into a marriage she does not want simply because you happen to be a duke. If that is all, I believe I'd like to have some luncheon before I depart for my club. Good day, Lord Brunswick."

Stunned, Matthew left the Roxleys and walked the short distance to his house next door. Once again, he'd been dismissed, this time by Miss Townsbridge's parents. He entered his foyer and handed his hat and gloves to Friederichsen, his butler, before continuing into his study. There, he slumped into the chair he'd bought when he'd moved in. Staring into the emptiness around him, he made his decision. He would not let two years of careful deliberation go to waste. Tomorrow he'd buy a big expensive bouquet of flowers and do his utmost to make Miss Townsbridge see reason.



SARAH WASN'T PRONE to anger, so feeling as though her head might explode was a rather distressing experience. Unsure what to do with her emotions, she paced her bedchamber floor while recounting each detail of the horrendous morning to her younger sister, Athena. "Naturally, none of the gentlemen had any interest in me after that," she huffed.

"I'm sorry," Athena said.

"Can you imagine? The blasted man had the gall to assume I'd fall into his arms with a sigh of pleasure and a thousand thanks for honoring me with his oh-so-magnificent attention." She made a gagging gesture, at which point her mother cleared her throat to announce her presence.

Sarah turned and gave her a blank look. She would not apologize for making fun of a man who continued to prove how awful he was.

"Luncheon will soon be served on the terrace," Lady Roxley said, "but first, I'd like to have a word with you alone, Sarah. In private."

Athena hopped off the bed with a thank-you-for-saving-me look directed at their mother and was gone before Sarah could blink. Her mother closed the door and directed her full attention toward Sarah. "Your father and I had a long talk with Brunswick."

"Oh no." Sarah took an instinctive step back. "Please don't tell me you've promised him I'll accompany him on some outing or entertain him for tea or—"

"Of course not, but since he is a duke and he did propose, it would have been wrong of us not to hear him out. In the end we made it clear that we would support you in whatever decision you make for your future - that we'd never insist you marry a man you don't like just because he happens to have a desirable title."

Sarah blinked. "You told him that?"

"Actually, your father did. He may have phrased it differently but the duke got the message, I assure you."

Relief swept through Sarah. She sank down onto the edge of her bed. "So then that's the end of it?"

"Unless he decides to try his luck again, which I seriously doubt. Or unless you change your mind."

"Why on earth would I do that?"

"Well, for one thing I'm not sure there will be an abundance of gentlemen willing to risk their pride after watching you turn down a duke with such ease. So if you wish to make a match, he might be your only option. For now," she hastily added.

"One more reason to hate him," Sarah grumbled. "He ruined my chances."

"Only until this whole debacle has been forgotten," her mother

said as she took a seat on Sarah's bed.

Sarah sighed. She wasn't sure that would happen any time soon, and in the meantime she wasn't getting one day younger. With six Seasons already behind her – *six* – she had hoped to make a match sooner rather than later. "His presumptuousness grates on my every nerve."

"Yes. He's horribly arrogant, I'll grant you that." Her mother nudged her shoulder. "Come, let's have some lunch and forget this morning ever happened."

Sarah knew it wouldn't be quite so simple. Her public refusal of Brunswick would be the subject of conversation in every Mayfair drawing room by tomorrow morning at the latest. She would be judged and labeled ungrateful, impossible to please, and possibly stupid. After all, what woman in her right mind – let alone a soon-to-be spinster – turned down a duke?

Rising, Sarah then followed her mother from the room and down the stairs. "I doubt a man like that has many friends."

"I really wouldn't know, Sarah, but you're probably right."

"And his family must despise him." Directing a few verbal stabs at the duke felt remarkably good.

Her mother drew to an abrupt halt on the stairs and turned. "I don't believe so."

Sarah tilted her head in question. "No?"

"No." Her mother pressed her lips together. "They're mostly dead."

*Dear heavens.*

Sympathy gripped Sarah's heart with such force it started to ache. A distinct feeling of guilt over what she'd just said crept under her skin. "What happened?"

Her mother resumed her descent. "I thought you weren't interested."

"I'm not." They reached the foyer and Sarah paused. "Well, all right. I might be a *little* interested."

"Hmm..." Her mother raised both eyebrows, but rather than start an argument over the wisdom of Sarah's curiosity, she said, "I don't know all the details. From what I gather there was a carriage accident when the duke was a child. He lost both of his parents and his siblings. A maternal aunt is, from what I gather, his only living relation."

"How awful," Sarah murmured even though awful wasn't enough to describe the suffering Brunswick must have endured when he was a boy. Perhaps she hadn't imagined the haunted look in his eyes after all. Maybe the pain still lingered. It might even be to blame for his reserved aloofness.

Dazed by the tragedy of the situation as a whole, Sarah drifted



onto the terrace where her father waited with Athena.

"I was wondering if you'd like to get away for a bit what with everything that's just happened," Papa suggested once they'd been seated. "We could go up to the Lake District for a couple of weeks."

"Actually," Sarah said, her mind reeling with possibilities and the potential disaster she might be about to set into motion, "I think I'd rather stay here."

"But he's right next door." Her father juttied his chin toward the brick wall separating the two properties.

"Yes." Sarah took a bite of salmon while everyone else stared at her in wonder. "But running away would not be very conducive."

"To what?" Athena carefully asked.

"To helping him overcome the loss he has suffered."

"Good Lord," Mama murmured, pressing her hand to her forehead.

"What loss?" Athena asked.

"His entire family died when he was child," Sarah explained, "and I don't believe he ever recovered."

"And what exactly, pray tell, has led you to this conclusion?" Papa inquired.

"There was this—" Sarah waved her hand "—profound unhappiness about him. I dismissed it at first on account of his arrogance, but now that I know what happened to him, I would like to try and...and..."

"Fix him?" Athena prompted.

"Well, yes," Sarah said with a smile.

"Let me stop you right there," Papa said. "The Duke of Brunswick is not an orphaned baby squirrel or a bird with a broken wing. He is a man – a duke – and you would do well not to interfere in his personal affairs. To do so can only lead to trouble."

Sarah held her father's gaze for a moment while letting his words sink in. "To do nothing would be unkind."

"Sarah," Papa warned.

"I regret informing you of his past," Mama murmured. "I should have known better."

"Yes," Papa agreed. "You should have."

"Will you help me?" Sarah asked Athena. "You've been very good at bringing people together in the past, and a *chance* encounter with the duke would allow me to strike up a conversation without him realizing I've deliberately sought him out."

"No," Papa said. "Enlisting your sister's help is a terrible idea."

"On the contrary, it's the perfect idea," Sarah said. "And both of you need to stop haranguing poor Athena because she played a part in what turned out to be two excellent matches. Just imagine if she hadn't. You'd be two grandchildren short."

Mama pressed her hand to her breast. "Good grief, Sarah."

"In any event," Sarah went on, undaunted, "I can think of nothing else."

"I can," Papa said. "Abandon this mad-cap notion. Set your mind to something else."

"I can't," Sarah said. "You know how I am. Once I get an idea in my head, it sticks until I have dealt with it in some way."

"In that case, you leave me no choice but to forbid you from speaking with Brunswick again," Papa said. He took a sip of his wine and promptly returned his attention to his food.

Sarah stared at him. He knew she'd heed his demand because in the end, he was acting out of love and concern, attempting to protect her from what he believed to be a terrible idea, and she was an obedient daughter. Somehow, she'd have to get around all of that.

"What if," she slowly began while pondering her options, "Brunswick approaches me?"

Her father coughed, cleared his throat, and prepared to speak.

"If that were to happen," Mama said before her husband was able to get one word out, "we would naturally expect you to conduct yourself with decorum."

"Meaning?" Sarah pressed.

"Well, it would be bad form of you to ignore him," Mama said, then glanced at Papa. "Would you not agree?"

Papa frowned. "Quite right. If the duke decides to instigate a conversation with you, then you must respond. But since he was turned away, first by you and then by myself, I very much doubt he'll make any such attempt."

"You're probably right," Sarah said.

"Finally, we're in agreement," Papa said with visible relief.

Willing to grant him his victory, Sarah resumed eating. The conversation turned to Sarah's niece and her upcoming birthday – a light discussion that offered a mental reprieve from all the tension the day had offered thus far.

Later, however, once Papa had left for his club and Mama had gone to call on a friend for afternoon tea, Sarah turned to Athena. "Are you still willing to help me?"

Athena's eyes widened. "You heard Papa."

"Indeed. He forbade me from approaching Brunswick but insisted I not ignore him if he approaches me." Sarah held Athena's gaze.

"Surely there's a way to make that happen."

Athena shook her head. "Your tenacity may prove foolhardy in this instance."

"I know, but considering my age and the fact that I've probably frightened away the last men who might have been interested in me,

it's not as though I have much to lose. On the other hand, there could be much to gain from helping him."

"Has it not occurred to you that he may not want your help?"

Sarah crossed her arms. "Of course. But he also wants a wife. Me, as it turns out."

"Until this morning, when you turned him down."

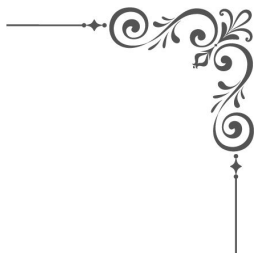
"And," Sarah said, deciding not to let her sister's comment deter her, "if I am able to put him to rights, he could turn out to be a wonderful match."

"You're serious?"

"Absolutely."

Athena slowly nodded. "Very well then. I'll get to work on a plan right away."

Contentment filled Sarah's veins. She was happiest when she was working toward a concrete goal – preferably one involving a rescue of some sort. As projects went, Brunswick would be her biggest yet. She only hoped she was up to the challenge.



## Chapter Two

“THE DUKE OF BRUSWICK would like to know if you’re in,” Simmons said the next morning when he located Sarah in the library an hour after breakfast.

She stared at the butler a moment, then turned to her sister. “Is this your doing?”

“No,” Athena said. “The best workable solution I’ve been able to come up with so far involves him coming to your rescue. Not exactly the sort of thing that can be arranged from one day to the next.”

“Hmm...” Sarah murmured, not daring to ponder the peril her younger sister had thought of placing her in.

“Should I tell him you’re out?” Simmons asked.

“No. Please show His Grace into the parlor and tell him I’ll join him there shortly.” Sarah waited until Simmons was gone, then turned to Athena. “He’s back. I can scarcely believe it.”

“Neither can I, but it does make this whole thing a great deal simpler.” Athena frowned. “The logistics involved in staging a robbery or a potential kidnapping would have been quite extensive.”

“That is what you had in mind?”

Athena gave her a what-did-you-expect sort of look. “You did task me with getting him to come to you. Not an easy thing, when walking up to a man I’ve not been introduced to would be completely improper.” She shrugged. “Seemed simpler to use a third party in order to create an incentive for him to rescue you.”

“Perhaps you ought to take a break from those adventure novels you favor,” Sarah said. She forced herself not to mention how glad she was to no longer need Athena’s help since doing so would only hurt her feelings.

“They’re generally more interesting than real life. Although I must confess, I’m quite intrigued by what’s going on in yours right now.”

“Please don’t romanticize it.”

“Why not? If all goes well, you will mend his heart and make him

fall head over heels in love with you. Is that not the plan?"

Sarah stared at her sister. "Only if he turns out to be the sort of man I can love in return."

"I have an abundance of faith in you, Sister. Just think of him as an injured puppy. You've experience with those."

Sarah groaned and went to find the man she might eventually choose to marry. Provided he ticked the right boxes on their wedding day. Which meant he would have to be kind to animals and humans alike. He would also have to be honest, patient, considerate, and get along well with her family. Additionally, she would insist on him telling her everything about his life so they could form a lasting partnership built on openness and trust.

It was what she'd witnessed between her own parents growing up, so she saw no reason to want something less. But she wasn't delusional. When it came to Brunswick, she was certain a long road waited without any guarantee of happiness, love, or marriage at the end.

With this in mind, she entered the parlor where one very tall duke proceeded to stare down his nose at her while affecting the perfect look of arch superiority.

"Miss Townsbridge," he said as he stuck out his hand, presenting her with a huge bouquet of pink roses. "These are for you."

"Thank you. They're lovely."

"Hmm. I suppose they are, rather."

The utterance was so offhanded it made him sound like the sort of person who'd never paid attention to flowers before. Maybe he hadn't. In which case Sarah had more work ahead than she'd realized.

She gave him a swift once over, called for a maid to fetch a vase, and placed the bouquet on a nearby table to wait for said vase. At this point she ought to invite him to sit and have tea. Instead, she said, "Let's take a walk."

"A walk." He glanced about as if at a loss.

"Yes. I happen to enjoy the activity. Plus, it will give us something to do while we talk."

"Of course." He seemed to consider her logic for a moment, then asked, "Will it take long?"

She really wasn't sure how to respond to that besides saying, "You called on me, so I suppose it will take however long you intend it to."

He made a sort of grunting sound, upon which she headed into the hallway, pausing only briefly in the parlor doorway to ask, "Are you coming or not?" before continuing toward the foyer. She allowed herself a small victorious smile when she heard the steady footfalls behind her.



MATTHEW'S EVERY INTENTION had been to make a better impression on Miss Townsbridge today. The flowers had been meant as a peace offering of sorts, but rather than give them the admiration he'd imagined she would, she'd set them aside with nary a glance. Although to be fair, she had said they were lovely.

Now, instead of sitting quietly with her in the parlor as he'd envisioned doing, he was trying to figure out why anyone would willingly choose to use their feet instead of a horse or carriage. In a way, it was his own damn fault for deciding to set his cap for a woman who took at least one long walk each day. He always saw her during his morning ride, at roughly this hour, marching through the park as if she were running late.

"I have a lovely curricule," he said with a hint of longing.

"How lucky for you." Her pace increased until he feared she might start jogging.

"I'd be happy to fetch it so we can enjoy a nice ride."

"The whole point in going for a stroll is not to sit."

"This isn't a stroll," he grumbled.

"In any event, taking a carriage rather defeats the purpose, wouldn't you say?" She glanced up at him as if she wasn't sure he could grasp that fact. "I gather you're not fond of walking."

"How on earth did you deduce that?"

She ignored the sarcasm, choosing instead to concentrate on the traffic as they got ready to cross the street. He liked that about her. She was too sensible to allow a needling comment to ruffle her feathers so much she forgot about being careful.

"Fresh air and exercise are important," she said once they'd entered the park. "Walking is the simplest way to obtain both and..." She glanced at him again. This time with the sort of appraising look that caused his muscles to tense. "Well, if you don't walk you obviously do something else or you wouldn't look like that."

Matthew's heart began beating faster. "Like what?"

She waved her hand at him. "Lean and such."

He almost laughed, the stretch of facial muscles so foreign to him, he stopped mid smile. How had she managed it? He supposed it could be chalked up to the offhanded, matter-of-fact manner in which she'd delivered her dry remark, as if she were giving advice on how to select a good slab of meat.

"I'm glad you noticed," he said. Was that a faint blush of pink creeping into her cheeks? Perhaps Miss Townsbridge wasn't quite as immune to him as she'd like to appear? Smirking, he drew closer to her side and caught her by the arm. She jerked in response to his touch but didn't otherwise pull away. Strange, the extent to which that pleased him. Deciding not to put too much weight on it - after all

it only made sense that he'd appreciate some agreeability - he said, "I prefer to engage in physical work."

Now why in the hell had he just said that? Wasn't it his intention to share as little about himself as possible in an effort to maintain a comfortable distance? Why, then, volunteer this personal information?

*Because you want to pique her interest.*

If that had indeed been his aim, even if only on a subconscious level, it had the desired result.

"What sort of work?" she asked with no small amount of curiosity.

Not surprising since few aristocrats ever engaged in any activity that might be misconstrued as labor. As a duke, he was even less likely to do so and... He frowned. What if Miss Townsbridge wouldn't approve? What if, in his haste to impress her with something he hoped she'd find more commendable than his approach to marriage proposals, he risked incurring additional displeasure?

Too late for that now.

"I lift rocks."

She actually sputtered. "You what?"

"I started building a folly a few years ago."

"On one of your estates?"

"No." He hardly ever visited those. "Here in London."

"In your back garden?" She'd stopped walking. Most likely so she could gape at him properly. "From what I've been able to make out, it's not any bigger than ours, in which case—"

"I will admit the folly takes up a large amount of space, but it gives me something to do." Something to busy his mind and steer his thoughts away from the constant darkness. "I decided to make an attempt at a medieval castle ruin."

Her eyes held his, allowing him to notice their color for the first time. It was more complex than he'd have imagined, a golden brown shade of bronze seeping into an outer ring made of green.

Unable to look away, he remained perfectly still until the sound of her voice pulled him out of his mesmerized state.

"And you've been working on this for years, you say?"

When he nodded she made a soft huffing sound and recommenced walking.

"I also fence," he said with a sudden and very perplexing need to assure her that he was normal, that he also engaged in gentlemanly sports appropriate to his station. The last thing he wanted was for her to start wondering if all his faculties were in order.

"I'd like to see it," she said.

"I'm afraid the club is open only to men."

"I was talking about the folly," she said as they made their way onto a path that would take them toward the lake. "You sound so

passionate about it, I think it might be a good place to start."

"Start what?"

"Getting to know you."

Dear God, he was an idiot. Getting to know each other was what he'd hoped to avoid. He didn't want her getting close, bonding with him and sharing interests. He wanted distance and solitude - no cause for affection.

"That won't be necessary," he said on the heels of all that thinking. "I want you as my wife, not as my friend or confidante."

She speared him with a scowl. "In that case we've little else to discuss. Good day, Your Grace."

She veered right at an increased pace.

*Damn.*

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. She was meant to see reason and tell him she'd reconsidered his offer. Instead she'd turned him down yet again without him even getting to the point of another proposal.

He should have insisted they stay in the parlor. No good ever came from walking. As evidenced by the blister starting to form on his right foot.

Irritated, he strode after Miss Townsbridge while cursing himself for selecting her. If it weren't for the fact that the Season was almost over, he might consider resuming his search for the perfect bride. Except of course he'd already pondered every available woman. In the end, Miss Townsbridge was the only viable option not only for the obvious reasons, but because none of the others would have turned him down.

The fact that she had, made him want her even more. This - whatever this was - had turned into a challenge. One he meant to win even if he had to agree to show her the damn folly.

Christ almighty, she was fast!

He quickened his pace, cursing the blister with each step he took. "Miss Townsbridge. Please wait a moment."

She drew to a halt and turned to face him. "There is no need for you to continue escorting me. In fact, I'm sure you'd rather not."

*Good God.*

He wondered if she was always this merciless or if she'd just decided to give him some sort of special treatment. Considering this was a quality he'd not noticed during his observations, she most likely had.

"On the contrary," he said, deciding it might be time to change his tactic, "I would enjoy nothing more."

She actually groaned and muttered something beneath her breath, at which point he simply had to smile. Again. How unexpected. And



yet, there was something wonderfully amusing about teasing this woman. It lifted his spirits and reminded him of the mischievous streak he'd had as a child. Before the darkness had swept in and drowned out his joy.

He deliberately blocked the memory by focusing his full attention on Miss Townsbridge. "I've reconsidered regarding the folly. I'd be happy to show it to you. Perhaps tomorrow if you're not otherwise engaged?"

"Oh." Her eyes had widened with surprise and he had to stifle a laugh. "What time?"

"Would three o' clock in the afternoon suit you?"

"Yes. Thank you." They stared at each other a moment, not in awkward silence exactly, but with a sense of uncertainty. Until she suddenly said, "Let's go fishing."

"Fishing?" Where the devil had that idea come from? It sounded spontaneous and more or less exactly like yet another thing he probably ought to avoid. The list kept growing while he continued ignoring every item on it. At least when it came to this, he had a good reason to dissuade her. "Last I checked, fishing required a bit of equipment. We, however, don't have any rods or bait or--"

"Not to worry. Everything we need can be rented right over there."

*Blast*

"Would it make any difference to you if I told you I'd rather not?"

"No." A devilish gleam appeared in her eyes. "In fact, I think that would only make me want to do it more. Especially since Lord Penwood did offer to take me until you ruined everything with your proposal."

Accepting his fate - for now - Matthew puffed out a breath and followed Miss Townsbridge over to the shed where all the necessary paraphernalia could be found.

Once they'd gotten all their gear together, including two boxes of worms, they wandered over to the area where fishing was allowed.

"Have you ever done this before?" Matthew asked, scanning the water.

"A few times. My parents have a lovely house in the Lake District. My siblings and I spent our summers there as children." Her gaze grew distant. Sentimental. "It was the ideal place for us to explore nature to our hearts' content. We'd ride, fish, climb trees, and build forts. It is, in fact, where I first discovered my fondness for walking."

"I see."

She grinned. "How about you? Have you done much fishing before?"

"Honestly?" When she gave a small nod, he shook his head. "Not really. I don't visit the countryside much, so I've not really had a

chance until now. Didn't even realize fishing was something one could do in London."

She stared at him. "What do you mean, you don't visit the countryside?"

Realizing he'd given away more about himself than he'd intended, he shrugged one shoulder to pretend indifference and focused on tossing the weighted hook at the end of his line into the water. "I'm not very partial to it."

"Why not?"

"Does it matter?"

She frowned at that and eventually turned away, giving her attention to her own fishing line. "Not really." He sighed in response until she followed the comment with, "Unless you're still trying to get me to marry you, in which case your oddities do become more important."

"Choosing to stay in London in a house I feel comfortable in is not an oddity. It's a personal choice."

"Hmm..." She looked at him with discriminating suspicion. "You bought that house yourself. Did you not?"

"Yes," he said without even bothering to hide his increased agitation. This was why he hadn't wanted to take a walk or go fishing. Because it invariably led to probing conversations from which there could be no escape.

"Why not live at Brunswick Manor instead?"

His grip on the fishing rod tightened. *Easy does it.* With long deep breaths he fought to keep the encroaching darkness at bay.

"Perhaps I don't care for it any more than you care for being treated like a soon-to-be spinster who can't get a man's attention without her mother's help."

Miss Townsbridge tightened her jaw and averted her gaze while Matthew cursed himself for his despicable rudeness. "I'm sorry," he said, wishing he could retract the words. "That was unkind."

"The truth isn't always pleasant, Lord Brunswick." A wistful smile pulled at the edge of Miss Townsbridge's mouth, and although he watched her in profile, there was no mistaking the clarity of her gaze as she looked out across the water. "I've always admired those who have the courage to speak it without any fear of repercussion."

Matthew could not take his eyes off her. He'd thought her only mildly pleasing to the eye until now, but in this moment of reflective pensiveness, with golden sunlight spilling across her cheek, she looked divine.

"Nevertheless. I shouldn't have said it."

She shrugged. "It wasn't incorrect."

"I disagree." He waited for her to turn her gaze toward him before

admitting, "I noticed you completely on my own. No one pointed you out and yet here I am, desperately trying to win your hand."

Her smile broadened, transforming into a wide and beautiful grin. "Desperately?"

"You'll see. Once I set my mind on something there's really no swaying me."

"I can be stubborn too, you know."

"As proven by your reluctance to consider my offer."

She let out a small sigh. "You're not inviting me for a night out at the theatre, Your Grace. What you're asking is for me to spend the rest of my life with you. Surely you can appreciate how impossible it is for me to even consider doing so without having some sense of what to expect."

"You won't want for anything."

"I'm not convinced of that." When he frowned she said, "Material things can't feed the heart or the soul. I won't accept a marriage devoid of friendship."

"Hence the fishing?"

She pursed her lips. "If we can't get along for a couple of hours, I don't see how we'll tolerate each other for several decades."

He liked her reasoning, even though it didn't mesh well with his plan to keep a distance. "And how would you say we're getting along?"

"Better than I'd imagined. We've already had our first proper argument, and yet we're still talking to each other. Plus, I've learned that you might not be as arrogant as I initially thought. If you were, you wouldn't have cared if your comment upset me." She gripped her rod in response to a tug on the line. "Goodness. Do you think you can help me with this?"

Setting down his own rod, Matthew leapt to her aid. Without thinking, he placed one hand over hers and held on tight while trying to reel in the taut line. The action brought him closer to her than ever before. His hip bumped hers and his arm settled firmly against her shoulder. Maintaining a gap between them while helping her keep the rod steady and reel in a fish was impossible. So he pretended their intertwined stance was perfectly normal and cast a quick glance about in case any onlookers disagreed.

"Look, look." Miss Townsbridge bounced with excitement, her body jostling his. "Goodness gracious, Lord Brunswick. It's huge!"

Gritting his teeth, Matthew put his back and upper arm strength into hauling the fish onto land. It was harder than he'd expected, wielding what had to be well over ten pounds of struggling weight hanging from the end of the line. The soles of his boots started slipping.

“How much do you want this monster?” he asked, bending his knees and leaning back further for added purchase.

“A lot,” she said as she leaned back as well, bringing her back against his chest, and her bottom...

*Dear God.*

He had to get her away from him before his body responded as he feared it might at any second. Already, a flare of desire was coursing through him as if to test his resolve. Damn it. They were pulling a wet, slimy creature out of the water. How the hell could he be getting aroused?

She shifted her weight once more, moving against him and...

Matthew cursed in frustration. She was trapped in his arms but if he let go and she didn't, that blasted fish would likely haul her straight into the water.

Right. He needed to focus. On the task at hand. Not her.

“I want you to let go,” he said, his jaw brushing hers as he spoke.

There was a pause, and then, “You do?”

Matthew's stomach clenched. Her voice was breathy and far too seductive for what they were doing. “Yes. Absolutely. Let go now and duck under my arm.”

“All right. If you think you can manage it on your own.”

“I can.” Certainly better than he could with her. Hell, she stood so close his brain could barely function. So if he hoped to convince his body it was meant to be fishing instead of engaging in an entirely different kind of sport, he needed her gone.

She huffed a breath, no doubt because she wanted to take credit for the catch as well, but did as he asked.

Sensible girl.

Matthew repositioned his grip and tried to reel in the line, but every time he thought he was making headway, the line would slip back out.

“I think the teeth have been ground off the gears,” he said and glanced around. There was quite a large group of onlookers now, all gawking at his inexperienced efforts. Matthew searched for the biggest man among them and called out, “You, there. Can you hold this steady for me while I murder that beast?”

This was personal now. Miss Townsbridge was watching. She'd said she wanted the fish and if getting it for her was what was required in order to earn her respect, then so be it. He sure as hell wasn't going to fail.

With this in mind, he handed the fishing rod to the man whose help he'd enlisted and began removing his boots.

“What are you doing?” Miss Townsbridge asked as she rushed to his side.

“Catching that fish,” Matthew said. He handed her his hat and gloves, shrugged out of his jacket, and retrieved the blade he always carried with him.

“Lord Brunswick.” Miss Townsbridge said, her voice both stern and perplexed, and containing something else - something that sounded a lot like admiration. “You’re not going in there are you?”

She pointed at the murky water.

“That is my plan.”

“But you’ll get wet.”

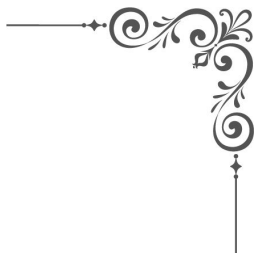
“I expect so. Yes.”

“But—”

“You told me you want that fish. The reel is done for, so this is the only way.” He leaned in close to her and quietly murmured, “Most women would have settled for the bouquet. I must confess you’re quite unusual. Interesting, I should say.”

“You really don’t have to do this.”

Matthew merely smiled and headed for the water. It no longer mattered if Miss Townsbridge retracted her request. He was still going in. Because nothing ever got the better of him. Not even a damn fish.



## Chapter Three

SARAH COULDN'T STOP smiling. It was ridiculous how happy she was right now in light of how irritated she'd been with Brunswick earlier. The superior tone he'd used as he'd presented her with the roses had grated on her every nerve, prompting her to completely forget her reason for wanting to see him again. The comment he'd made later about not wanting her as a friend or confidante but solely as a means by which to secure his lineage hadn't helped.

His stance on marriage had bothered her to the point where she'd wished herself a million miles away from him. Perhaps because it stood in stark opposition to everything she wanted for herself. Allowing high emotion to guide her actions had not been the least bit useful. Thank goodness, he'd followed her. Otherwise she'd be cursing herself right now for wasting the chance she'd been given to further her acquaintance with him – to give him the friendship he'd clearly stated he did not want.

She glanced at him now. Drenched from head to toe, he walked beside her, a sack containing the carp he'd harpooned with his knife flung over his right shoulder.

A smile threatened to capture her mouth. "Thank you for catching that for me."

"You're welcome."

She bit her lip, told herself to resist the urge to tease him, only to find herself saying, "We should do this again sometime."

He glared at her. "I don't think I'm ever going near a lake again."

She understood. Even though the water had only reached his waist, the lakebed had been slippery, the carp impossible to wrestle while keeping his balance.

Sarah laughed, earning her another glare. It wasn't funny. It really wasn't. But the memory of him splashing about in the Serpentine made her laugh once more. "I'm so sorry."

His only response this time was a grunt.

“At least you got it in the end.”

“Indeed.”

“And might I add that you looked quite dashing when you emerged from the water, holding the carp up like a trophy.”

Truth was, he'd looked rather scandalous with his white shirt and breeches plastered to his solid frame. She flushed just thinking about it.

He shook his head and finally smiled, just a little. “I think I'm beginning to understand why you're still unattached, Miss Townsbridge. You're clearly attracted to the bizarre.”

“Not at all,” she answered gamely. “But I did enjoy your company today. Far more than I expected.”

“Then I gather you still intend to call on me tomorrow for a tour of the folly?”

“If you will permit.”

They arrived at her door and she called for the butler to come and assist them. Brunswick handed over the fish and the servant went to deposit it in the kitchen.

“You'll have to bring your parents or one of your brothers. A maid won't suffice when it comes to paying an unmarried man a visit in his home.”

“Not to worry. I have no interest in ruination.”

“Good. Let's keep it that way.” He cleared his throat and gave a short bow. “Good day, Miss Townsbridge.”

Sarah bobbed a small curtsy. “Your Grace.”

“Well?” Athena asked as soon as the door was shut.

Sarah jumped. “Goodness. Where did you come from?”

“I live here as well. Now tell me, how did it go?”

Sarah started climbing the stairs with Athena in her wake. “He's not an easy man to ignore.”

“So what happened?”

“We talked, argued, made up, and caught a fish.” Sarah turned left at the top of the landing and continued toward her bedchamber in silence. Apparently, her sister had no idea what to say to any of this. Which was fine since Sarah wasn't sure how to explain it or what to feel or anything really. The morning hadn't gone as she'd expected - not even close. Rather than hating every second she'd spent in Brunswick's company, she'd ended up enjoying herself tremendously. “He's actually not that bad.”

“What?”

Sarah blinked. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. Well, what was done was done. Turning, she told Athena, “I'm going over to his home tomorrow to see a folly he's building.”

“Next door?”

“Yes. In his back garden.” The more she thought of it, the more excited she was to see his creation. She’d not lied when she said he’d spoken of it with great passion. It was his project - something he cared about - and this alone was enough to spark her curiosity. She realized Athena was gaping at her. “I’ll have to have a proper escort, of course. Hopefully, Mama and Papa won’t mind.”

Athena just nodded.

“Did I not tell you to stay away from him?” Sarah’s father asked that evening at dinner when Sarah mentioned her walk with Brunswick. He and his wife had both been out for most of the day, so Sarah had not had the chance to broach the subject until now. “I thought I was very clear.”

“You were, Papa, and I did not thwart your wishes,” Sarah assured him. “The duke came to call on me entirely of his own volition. I couldn’t very well turn him away when he went to the trouble of bringing flowers.”

“The bouquet of roses in the parlor?” Mama asked. “I wondered where those had come from.”

Papa shook his head as if in defeat and groaned before taking another bite of his food.

“Brunswick has invited me to visit his home tomorrow afternoon,” Sarah said, “and since I cannot go alone, I’m hoping you will be able to join me.”

“Unfortunately, we have a prior engagement with the Glenfitches tomorrow,” Sarah’s mother explained. “I’m sorry, but it would be horribly rude of us to cancel at such short notice.”

“Of course,” Sarah said. She pondered her less agreeable options. “I’ll have to ask one of my brothers then.”

“Are you sure you want to further your acquaintance with him, Sarah?” Her father gave her a direct look. “Visiting his home immediately after he brought you flowers would suggest an interest on your part.”

“You could postpone until next week,” her mother said. “I believe our schedule is more open then.”

“I’d rather not wait,” Sarah said.

Everyone stared at her but it was her father who spoke. “I’m not sure I understand why.”

Sarah shrugged and took another bite while wondering what Brunswick might be doing at that same moment. Was he sitting in a big empty dining room all alone, or had he gone out to his club? “My encounter with him today was a great success. I feel as though the duke and I have begun forming a friendship of sorts, and I would like to take advantage of that.”

“For the sake of helping him with his broken heart.” Papa took a



deep breath – the kind that seemed to suggest he needed additional strength to deal with his daughter. “He is not your responsibility, Sarah.”

“I am aware, but we’ve been over this already so you know my position.” She wasn’t ready to suggest she might eventually marry him. That particular conversation would have to wait until she’d figured out whether or not Brunswick could be the sort of man she’d want to spend the rest of her life with.

“The fish is excellent by the way,” her father added. “Carp, is it?”

“Indeed.” Sarah beamed. “Brunswick caught it.”

Her father choked on the bite he’d just taken. Coughing, he reached for his wine and drank. “You went fishing with him?”

“Yes. It was actually a great deal of fun.”

“Really?” A secretive smile teased Mama’s lips. “Perhaps we were too quick to judge him.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Papa grumbled. “Marching into a garden party and asking a woman you’ve never met to marry you is not normal behavior.”

“I agree,” Sarah said, “but I have decided to give him a second chance.”

“Just don’t ask Charles to go with you tomorrow. He’s too overbearing.”

“She’s going to visit an unmarried man in his home,” Papa said. “I don’t think I’d mind a bit of overbearingness from her eldest brother.”

“Nonsense, my dear,” Sarah’s mother responded. “We’ve raised a responsible young woman. I’ve no doubt we can trust her.”

“Neither do I,” Papa said. “But we’d also be trusting a duke who’s very determined to wed her.”

“I see.” Sarah’s mother’s eyes twinkled. “You’re worried he might be as daring as you were with me.”

“We need to put an end to this conversation right now,” Athena told Sarah. “Before they say something we can’t un-hear.”

A bright pink blush colored their mother’s cheeks “Remember how you used to—”

“I’ll ask them all and see which one can spare the time,” Sarah blurted. She took a long swallow of wine. “If you will excuse me, I think I’d better dispatch the missives right away. It’s already rather late.”

“I’ll help,” Athena said.

“Yes, yes,” their mother murmured, her attention fixed entirely on her husband while he looked at her in a way Sarah hoped she would soon forget.

She fled the room with Athena close behind and went to find her writing supplies. Two hours later, she had her answer. Charles, James,

and William would all be joining her for the visit. Because, as they'd each written back, they didn't know Brunswick well and what they did know, they didn't like. In other words, they wanted to know what she saw in him and why she'd developed a sudden interest.

Sarah sighed. This wasn't what she'd wanted. Enjoying a bit more laughter with Brunswick while getting to know him better would be impossible with three protective men guarding her against the threat of inappropriate innuendos and stolen kisses.

*Not* that she anticipated any of those.

With a groan of frustration she got into bed and did her best to clear her head. Now was not the time to start wondering what Brunswick's lips might feel like against her own. And yet, it took longer than she wanted for sleep to finally claim her.



WHEN FRIEDRIECHSEN showed Miss Townsbridge onto the terrace where Matthew had chosen to wait for her, he did not expect the lady to be followed by all three of her brothers. Of course, it was his own fault. If he'd only told his butler to announce her arrival instead of showing her straight through, the man would have had a chance to mention it.

Schooling his features in an effort to mask his surprise and his growing unease, Matthew stood and greeted his guests. "Miss Townsbridge. It is a pleasure to see you again."

Ignoring the three stony-faced men flanking her, he stepped forward, took her hand in his, and placed a swift kiss upon her gloved knuckles.

"Your Grace," she murmured, allowing a smile to curve toward the pink blush now filling her cheeks. "I must apologize for my entourage. It wasn't my intention to invade your home like this, but my parents were otherwise occupied, and when I asked my brothers if they could spare the time, they all insisted on coming along."

"It's quite all right," Matthew assured her even though his stomach was now tied in a knot. Proving himself in front of Miss Townsbridge's parents was one thing, but her brothers? He'd rather eat crud.

"They're just being protective."

"And nosy," she told him slyly.

Matthew grinned. He'd been right to look forward to seeing her again.

"I thought you said he always scowled," the youngest Townsbridge, whom Matthew believed was called William, told his oldest brother. The middle brother - James, was it? - promptly stepped on William's foot. "Ouch!"

Miss Townsbridge rolled her eyes, sighed, and swept her hand in

her brothers' direction. "Allow me to introduce Mistfers Charles, James, and William Townsbridge." She made a face at them - the sort that seemed to warn they'd better behave. Matthew pressed his lips together while she gestured toward him next and said, "His Grace, the Duke of Brunswick."

Matthew dipped his head toward his hopefully soon-to-be brothers-in-law and exchanged a few more pleasantries with them before addressing the only person present in whom he had any interest. "Would you like refreshment before we take a closer look at the folly?"

"Perhaps after?" Miss Townsbridge peeked past him at the part of the garden she could glimpse from where they stood. "I'm rather eager to get started."

"As you wish," he said and offered his arm. Her interest in his project pleased him more than he would have expected.

"The fish was excellent by the way," she told him as they took the few steps leading down to the neatly trimmed lawn.

"Truly?"

Miss Townsbridge nodded. "I actually brought you a piece so you can try it. Your butler had a maid deliver it to your cook."

Warmth crept under his skin on account of her thoughtfulness. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

"It only seemed fair considering all the trouble you went to in order to catch it." Her lips twitched. "In fact, I am almost relieved to see you looking so well."

"Why Miss Townsbridge, do I finally sense a bit of remorse over the spill I took?"

"It can't have surprised you." He raised an eyebrow and she added, "You were wrestling a large, slippery carp while standing in a lake. Your fall was expected, but yes, I would have felt slightly bad if you'd also caught your death."

It was impossible not to find humor in her dry wit. So Matthew rewarded her with another one of his reacquired smiles. "Only slightly?"

"Well," she said with a prim little sniff. "Anything more would suggest I might care about you, and that, my dear duke, would only go to your head."

Matthew's chest expanded with pleasure. He genuinely liked her. So much it almost seemed a pity to marry only to try and avoid her.

But what choice did he have? She was the woman he wanted, the one he'd spent two years selecting. He couldn't walk away now - didn't want to. But neither could he risk the threat she posed to his heart, for if there was one thing he could not ignore, it was how easy it would be to love her.

He clenched his jaw and tried to rid himself of that terrifying possibility. All he had to do was romance her a bit. Just enough to convince her to change her mind. It shouldn't take long. Certainly not as long as it would for him to develop those dangerous feelings he'd sworn he'd never fall prey to again. As long as he focused on his goal and kept a clear head, he'd be fine.



“DID YOU REALLY BUILD this yourself?” Sarah asked as they drew closer to the folly. She'd only glimpsed the left side of it from the terrace due to the coniferous trees flanking the edge.

“It's not complete, but yes. No one else has placed a single stone.”

Pride filled his voice, as well it should. Sarah wasn't sure what she'd expected, but it hadn't been this perfectly crafted wall made to look like it was centuries old. Uneven along the edge, as if some of the stone had corroded with time, it rose up to join with an overhead arch.

Like a child eager to explore, she let go of his arm and passed underneath to a neatly paved courtyard containing a pit filled with firewood at its center. Partly melted candles were placed in nooks around the periphery, promising a magical escape after dark.

“I'm quite impressed,” Charles said, speaking to Brunswick as the men joined her. “You clearly put a great deal of thought and effort into this.”

“All it's missing now is the last bench,” Sarah said, noting that only three had been completed.

“My plan is to start on that next,” Brunswick said while leaning one shoulder against a pillar. His gaze followed Sarah as she continued observing the structure.

“I could use a retreat like this in my garden,” James said. “My wife would love it. Might you be willing to make another, Brunswick?”

Brunswick responded with a wry grin. “Not a chance.”

Sarah smiled while giving her attention to the far corner. She allowed her hand to slide over the stones Brunswick had carried and hauled into position. “You should plant some fragrant climbers, Your Grace. I can just picture this wall overgrown with honeysuckle. Imagine it spilling over the top edge right there and—”

“No.”

His clipped tone caused her to turn and look at him with surprise. A muscle in his jaw flexed. “There won't be any honeysuckle or any other plants for that matter.”

“But—”

“I believe I promised refreshments. After you, Miss Townsbridge.”

Sarah only hesitated for the amount of time it took to give her

brothers a questioning look. When Charles juttied his chin in the direction they'd come, she started forward while trying not to feel too put out.

It was only a suggestion, she wanted to say. Brunswick needn't be so curt. Glancing back, she saw that he walked alone right behind James and William, but it was his dark expression that tore at her heart. Something in her words had put a severe damper on his mood.

"Do you think we ought to make our excuses and leave?" she asked Charles. Her brother had fallen into step beside her right before they reached the terrace.

"That depends entirely on you and how much you care," he told her softly.

Sarah watched Brunswick's scowl deepen. "Then I suppose we're staying. Shall we sit?"

Charles pulled out a chair for Sarah. She was just sitting down when the rest of the party arrived, all of them claiming a seat. Except for Brunswick.

"I'll call for some tea," the duke said, not breaking his stride as he disappeared into the house.

"I think His Grace may have an aversion to honeysuckle," William whispered.

Sarah glared at him. "Be quiet."

"It does seem a bit odd," James murmured.

"Shut up," Charles hissed.

A maid appeared in the next instant, carrying a tray filled with cups, saucers, a teapot, and a plate containing some tasty looking biscuits. Brunswick, however, remained absent.

"I'm going to find the necessary," Sarah informed her brothers several minutes later when Brunswick still hadn't returned and most of the biscuits had been eaten.

"One of us should go with you," James said.

Sarah turned to him. "Absolutely not."

"You can't go alone." James turned to Charles. "Tell her it wouldn't be proper."

Charles met Sarah's gaze and smiled. "She's a grown woman. I think she can manage a visit to the necessary on her own."

Relief flooded her veins. She'd not expected her oldest brother to be so accommodating. "Thank you, Charles."

She stood and he caught her by the hand, stopping her for a moment. "Don't be too long."

His voice was firm. Sarah answered with a swift nod and he promptly released her. As she hastened away she heard James say, "You do know she's going to see what's keeping Brunswick."

"We might have to force a marriage," William muttered.

Charles's response was lost to her as she hurried toward the front of the house. All was quiet. She opened the first door she found and peered inside what ought to have been the dining room. Only it was completely empty, devoid of all furniture. There wasn't even a painting on the wall.

The same was almost true of the parlor though it did contain a seating arrangement consisting of two sofas and two armchairs placed around a low table. But that was it. There were no knickknacks, no personal items to speak of, not even a clock or a vase.

Sarah frowned. She'd noticed how sparse the foyer and hallway were when she'd arrived, but hadn't given it much thought since she'd actually liked the simplicity. It now became clear that the lack of decor had nothing to do with good taste, but reflected an emptiness that looked like a symptom of emotional distress. After all, Brunswick had lived here for years, only it seemed he'd not really moved in.

Leaving the parlor, Sarah approached the next door, eased it open, and peeked inside. Brunswick was there, his back toward her while he...painted. She stepped inside and quietly watched him move his brush across the wall. The light blue color dominating the room disappeared beneath a layer of creamy yellow.

"What are you doing?" This wasn't normal behavior. In fact, now that she thought about it, very little about the duke was as it should be. At least not once one dove beneath the surface.

"The blue was starting to wear on me, so I'm changing it."

"But you have guests. You can't just walk away without excusing yourself."

"I'm a duke, Miss Townsbridge, and this is my home, so I'll do as I please."

She stared at him in dismay. He hadn't so much as glanced at her since she'd walked in. And he was wrong. This wasn't a home, but that was something she'd try to address later.

First, she had to give him a kick in the arse. Proverbially speaking of course. "If you truly want to woo me into marriage, you might consider making more of an effort."

Rounding on her, paint splattering onto the carpet, he gave a glare so fierce she took a step back. "Effort? So far I've done everything you've asked of me."

He wasn't wrong. Maybe she was being unfair. The truth was, she could sense there was something broken about him and instinct compelled her to try and help. It wouldn't be easy unless she understood him and right now she didn't, which bothered her more than it probably should.

"You could ask something of me in return."

His eyes pierced hers. "Marry me, Miss Townsbridge."

“Something besides that.”

“I don’t want anything else.”

He turned away and resumed painting while Sarah tamped down the fierce regret his words caused. He didn’t want to get to know her and she had no clue why. All he wanted was her agreement to be his wife. It made no sense. And it left her with little else to say except, “Thank you for showing me the folly, Your Grace, and for the refreshments. My brothers and I should probably go now. We’ll show ourselves out.”

When he failed to respond and just kept on painting, she left the room and closed the door softly behind her. He’d lost his family over a decade ago. She’d sensed he’d not yet recovered, but it was becoming very clear to Sarah that she was dealing with much deeper wounds than she’d ever have thought possible. It was the only conclusion she could draw from the lifeless rooms, his decision to take on a massive construction project alone, along with his peculiar decision to leave his guests in favor of painting his study because she’d mentioned honeysuckle. The word must have triggered something. Sarah was certain of it. And she had every intention of figuring out what, so she could help him past his suffering.



*DAMN, DAMN, DAMN.*

Matthew tossed his paintbrush aside, not caring about the mess he’d created. Cleaning it up would give him something to do later tonight when the nightmares woke him.

He stormed out of the room, fully aware he’d just undone whatever progress he’d made with Miss Townsbridge. All because she’d mentioned honeysuckle.

*Christ.*

*What were the bloody chances?*

“I need a change of clothes,” he informed Albertson, his valet.

“Going out, Your Grace?” Albertson asked.

“To my aunt’s,” Matthew clarified.

“Ah.”

His best buckskin breeches were promptly selected along with a newly starched shirt, a waistcoat cut from creamy silk brocade, and a superfine jacket very few Englishmen could afford. To finish off the ensemble, Albertson presented Matthew with a freshly buffed pair of gleaming black boots.

“Excellent choice,” Matthew said. He allowed Albertson to help him dress, solely to make the man feel necessary, and departed.

One hour later he sat in his aunt’s drawing room, well into his second cup of coffee. The cream puff she’d set on a plate before him

remained untouched.

“Frankly, I don’t see how I can help,” said Aunt Lydia, more formally known as Mrs. Perkins. “According to what you’ve told me, you’re well on your way to making an utter fool of yourself and all for a woman you hardly know. If I were you, which I thank God I’m not, I’d walk away from this mess before it gets worse.”

Matthew stubbornly shook his head. “I’ve made up my mind.”

Aunt Lydia sank against her chair with a sigh. “Why? There must be countless women who’d eagerly be your wife, among which there’s surely one who strikes your fancy. So why do you have to complicate things? Why go after the one woman who won’t say yes to your proposal?”

“For one thing, I’ve dismissed the rest, and you know me, I’m not one to settle for second best.”

His aunt snorted. “Like a horse wearing blinders. I never could make you glance away from the destinations you set for yourself as a boy. It was almost as if you feared you might fall the moment you looked to one side.”

“She mentioned honeysuckle.”

Aunt Lydia’s expression sagged with sympathy. “Oh, my dear boy.”

“It made me so angry I struggled to speak. I certainly couldn’t explain it, so I left, and then she was gone and I’m just not...I’m not sure how to fix it.”

“The simplest way would be to tell her the truth. Explain what happened and then apologize.”

Matthew dropped his gaze to his lap. “I don’t know how to talk about it with anyone else. I’ve no idea how to begin.”

Aunt Lydia placed one hand on top of his and gave it a squeeze. “It will come to you when you’re ready, and if you’re as determined to win Miss Townsbridge’s hand in marriage as you suggest, you’ll figure it out.”

“How do you do it?” Matthew met her calming gaze. “How do you manage to go on without them?”

“Matthew, my loss was never as great as yours. Of course I mourned my poor sister and her family, but I still had my parents and two other siblings. And then I met Mr. Perkins who blessed me with children of my own and in time, my heart healed.”

“I envy you that.”

“I’m sorry.” She withdrew her hand. “What happened was tragic. I did my best to help you through it, Matthew, but you were impossible to reach. In many ways you still are.”

“I can’t stand thinking about it.” He finished his coffee and stood. “Reliving it while I explain myself to Miss Townsbridge would be unbearable.”

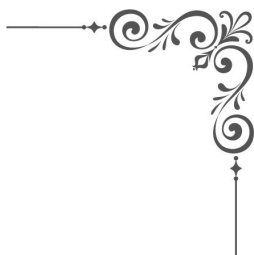


“So then?”

“I’ll have to find another way.”

The look on his aunt’s face wasn’t the least bit reassuring, but to his relief, she didn’t berate him. Instead, she wished him good luck and saw him to the door. “You parents would want you to be happy, Matthew. You know that, don’t you?”

He gave a swift nod and departed. Of course he knew this. It was part of the reason why guilt clung to him like a wet blanket. Because he just couldn’t seem to move on as he was supposed to.



## Chapter Four

THE BALL HOSTED BY the Marquess of Foxborough in honor of his wife's birthday appeared to be a smashing success. Standing with her mother, Sarah watched the quadrille that was currently underway. It was two weeks since she'd walked out of Brunswick's house. Two weeks of indecision and turmoil during which she'd struggled with her desire to try and help him. If she were smart, she'd focus more of her time and energy on the rabbit she'd rescued a few days ago. She'd spotted the animal during a walk in Hyde Park. It had been lying under a bush along one of the walkways. When she'd crouched for a closer inspection, she'd noticed the injured hind leg covered in blood. It wasn't until she'd brought it home and gotten it cleaned up that she'd seen the teeth marks. From a runaway dog or a fox.

Sarah glanced around the sparkling ballroom. Every man her mother had invited to that blasted garden party was in attendance. None had asked her to dance. In fact, all appeared to be making a very deliberate effort to avoid eye contact with her.

With an inward sigh she turned to her mother. "Will you still love me if I never marry?"

"Of course. It wouldn't do for your father and me to let all our children go anyway. We need one of you to care for us in our dotage." She gave Sarah a cheeky smile. "Of course, we did imagine Athena would do so, but we'll be just as happy with you, dearest."

Sarah rolled her eyes and nudged her mother's arm with her elbow. "You're too hard on her, Mama. Athena has blossomed into a wonderful woman you ought to be proud of."

"I am proud of her." Sarah's mother looked aghast. "Whyever would you think I'm not?"

"Because you always make those little comments - the ones suggesting no man will ever want her, that where she goes scandal will surely follow. It's really not fair."

Sarah's mother pressed her lips together firmly. Contrition

tightened her features. "You're right. I suppose it's become a bad habit."

"Well, I think it needs to stop. Athena hears you, you know. She's not deaf. And although she doesn't talk about it, I'm fairly sure she thinks you believe she was wrong to stop Charles's wedding."

"It did cause a bit of a stir."

"To be sure. But in the end things worked out for the better. We can all agree on that, can we not?"

Her mother smiled. "You've a good head on your shoulders, Sarah. I only wish all these foolish men could see how lucky they'd be with you as their wife."

"Maybe it's just as well," Sarah mused. "In truth, I'm not sure they'd be interesting enough for me."

"But the duke is?"

"Certainly, though not necessarily in a good way." Her mood dimmed as she thought back on her last encounter with him. "He's troubled. So much so I'm not sure I can help."

"Time will tell, I suppose."

Provided she ever saw him again.

"Oh, I see Viscountess Ruthridge over there, "Mama said. "Haven't spoken to her in an age. Shall we go and greet her together?"

A vision of herself as her mother's lady companion years from now clicked into place. Was this what it would be like? Would she always remain on the edge of things, looking at all the fun being had in the middle while resigning herself to the company of older ladies? She'd never been the outgoing one. That role belonged to Athena. Instead, she was quiet and reserved, always waiting for the right man to sweep her into his arms and fall madly in love with her.

Honestly. She was too old for such fanciful nonsense.

Though not old enough to completely lose hope.

"You go ahead, Mama." Being a wallflower wasn't so bad. She liked people-watching and the vantage point was better here than it would be on the opposite side of the room. Or so she told herself. "I think I shall stay here a while longer. The refreshment table is closer and I've been eyeing some of the sandwiches."

"Very well." Her mother looked across the dance floor. "Your brothers and sisters-in-law will soon be finished anyway, so you won't lack company for long."

Sarah knew she meant well, but the comment and what it implied still grated. Nevertheless, she forced a smile, gave a small nod, and watched her mother drift away with her billowing emerald organza skirts trailing behind. Fanning herself, Sarah cast a gaze back to the dance floor. She was secretly glad she wasn't out there. This particular dance was taking forever. The soles of her feet would have been worn

out by now if she'd joined the set.

Thank God no one had asked.

"Miss Townsbridge?" a footman inquired.

She stared at him blankly, then slowly nodded.

He discreetly gave her a note and said, "This is for you," before stepping away and disappearing into the crowd.

Sarah glanced at the folded piece of paper. She'd never received such a mysterious note before. Unfolding it, she read the brief message.

*Meet me on the terrace.*

*Brunswick*

Curt and to the point. No please or thank you. Just the expectation of being heeded. Sarah placed the note in her reticule and moved toward the French doors. Ordinarily, she believed, she would have taken issue with such arrogance. Especially after the way in which they'd last parted. But instead, she felt a secret thrill. Brunswick wanted to see her, so he must have something to say. Sarah couldn't wait to learn what it might be. She also realized with some surprise that she was ridiculously eager to simply see him again.

She gave her head a little shake as she pushed through the doors. How could she possibly have missed this model of serious aloofness?

*Because there's more to him than that.*

What she'd missed were those moments when he'd relaxed. He didn't strike her as someone who easily smiled, and yet in the brief time she'd known him, she'd seen his face transformed as he gave way to humor, and it humbled her.

Surveying the terrace, she took a moment to spot him, but when she did, the strangest urge to run to him assaulted her. She resisted the pull and slowly crossed to where he stood, slightly obscured in a corner where the torchlight didn't quite reach.

Tall and perfectly still, he watched her approach. Sarah's pulse leapt and her stomach started to flutter in a way she'd not experienced since her presentation at court. He'd been strikingly handsome in his day clothes, but dressed in his evening attire, she didn't think there was a man in all of England who could compare. Not even her brothers, who'd always struck her as being blessed with exceptionally good looks.

"Your Grace," she said when Brunswick didn't speak. "You wished to see me?"

His expression, cast in shadows, appeared as stern as ever. It was impossible for her to discern the emotion in his eyes which made it difficult to perceive his mood. The flutter in her stomach intensified until it turned into a whirlwind of utter confusion. Why did he affect her so? It didn't make any sense.

“You look incredible tonight.”

His soft-spoken words felt like a caress, which only confirmed her descent into madness.

“Thank you.” She straightened her spine and hoped she didn’t look too pleased with the compliment. After all, the man was conceited enough as it was. She offered a smile. “You look rather dashing yourself.”

His eyes held hers until her heart hammered against her breast. Something was different tonight. He was different. She wasn’t sure how, but she could feel it.

“I would like to apologize to you,” he eventually said. “My behavior the last time we met was horribly rude. I’m embarrassed by it, Miss Townsbridge, but there are things that plague me - memories I cannot seem to escape. Sometimes, they creep up on me without a moment’s warning, and when that happens my instinct tells me to run.”

Sarah stared at him in rapt silence. She was captivated by his confession, both surprised and honored by what he was willing to share. She’d not expected it. Afraid to push him too hard yet needing to know a bit more, she carefully asked, “Do you know why this happens?”

“Yes.” He reached for her hand and twined his gloved fingers with hers. “Can you forgive my behavior toward you and your brothers?”

“Of course.”

His expression relaxed and he blew out a breath. “Thank God. I was worried you wouldn’t.”

Something else she’d not expected. “Really?”

The edge of his mouth lifted to form an incredibly roguish smile. “Does it surprise you to know I enjoy your company?” When she nodded, he raised her knuckles to his lips for a brief kiss. “It shouldn’t. You’re the only one who can make me smile.”

Speechless, Sarah could only gape at him. She wasn’t sure if he was being honest or deliberately flirtatious. Either way, he made her feel appreciated, as though she’d accomplished something meaningful, something he was grateful for.

“I’m glad,” she heard herself say. “More than you can possibly imagine.”

His eyes gleamed as he bowed his head toward hers. She sucked in a breath. Would he kiss her? She wasn’t yet sure. But what if he did? Should she allow it?

Her heart pounded harder as he drew nearer. She was asking herself the wrong questions. What she ought to be asking was, did she want to allow such intimacy between them?

Yes, her body insisted with wild jubilation. Yes, you most certainly

do. You've never been kissed before. Don't pass up this chance.

Her brain was far more hesitant, warning her to be careful, to not give him the wrong impression. If they kissed, surely he'd think they were on their way to the altar.

Before she could finish her internal debate, his cheek brushed the side of her head, and then he whispered against her ear, "Dance with me, Miss Townsbridge."

A shiver raced through her. She knew she wasn't a stunning beauty. If asked, she would describe herself as ordinary, perhaps even plain. Athena had always been the one with the almond-shaped eyes, delicate nose, and full lips set in a heart-shaped face surrounded by a thick mass of curls.

Not once in her life had Sarah felt desirable.

Until now in this very moment with Brunswick's seductive voice breezing over her skin, his masculine scent, a rich blend of brandy and sandalwood, swirling around her, and the warmth of his hand clasping hers.

It was dizzying, and as a result she could only nod.

The moment she did, his lips grazed her cheek, so swiftly she scarcely had time to appreciate the gentle caress.

"Thank you." He offered his arm and she accepted. A wicked smile teased his lips. "I sincerely hope the next dance is the waltz."



IT WAS.

Chest tight with emotion, Matthew clasped Miss Townsbridge's hand while placing his left palm against her back. He hadn't lied when he'd told her she looked lovely tonight. In fact, she'd stolen his breath when she'd stepped out onto the terrace, dressed in a gown cut from golden silk. The fabric hugged her delectable figure, instilling in him a severe urge to run his hands over each perfect curve.

The music started and he stepped forward, guiding her into the first part of the dance. His apology seemed to have worked, or perhaps it had been his explanation. He'd merely offered some measly crumbs to appease her curiosity, but they'd gained the sympathy and forgiveness he needed. All he had to do now was play the seductive charmer, and he'd no doubt she'd soon give him the answer he wanted.

It wouldn't be hard.

Pressing his hand more firmly against her back, he caught her gaze and held it while leading her in a wide arc. "I'd like you to join me at the opera tomorrow evening." He took a deep breath and savored the sweet scent of roses that clung to her skin. "*Don Giovanni* is playing. Have you seen it?"

“No. I’ve not had the chance yet. And I’d be delighted,” she added softly. “Thank you.”

His heart expanded with an indefinable emotion he dared not explore more fully just then. He cleared his throat. “You’ll need an escort, of course.”

“I’m sure my parents would be happy to accompany me.”

They confirmed this as soon as the dance was over, allowing Matthew to breathe a sigh of relief. Happy with the progress he’d made that evening, he stepped back and gave a short bow. “Until tomorrow then.”

“You’re already leaving?” Miss Townsbridge asked.

He smiled in response to the hint of regret playing in her eyes. “I only came so I could enjoy one dance.”

Her blush made him wish he could stay, but he’d already made up his mind before coming. If he was to win her, he had to move slower and with more finesse. Their interaction this evening was a perfect example. He’d handled it with the skill of a grand master chess player. And now it was time to retreat - to make her miss him a little so she would rejoice when they met again tomorrow.

Slowly but surely he’d make her crave him. Until she dreamed of letting him kiss her. Until the only answer she’d give him was, “Yes.”

He addressed her parents. “It’s been a pleasure.”

“Indeed,” Lord Roxley murmured. “We look forward to seeing you again soon.”

Matthew gave a quick nod, smiled at Miss Townsbridge, and departed. Once in his carriage, he tried not to worry about the anticipation kicking his own heart into a faster rhythm. He was simply excited because his plan appeared to be working. It had nothing to do with anything else, certainly not with an eager desire to spend more time getting to know Miss Townsbridge and absolutely not with some desperate longing he harbored for her to feel affection toward him.

No. There was nothing like that. Because that would suggest he was getting emotionally attached. Which he absolutely was not. She was just a woman he liked enough to marry. Nothing more.



“LAST NIGHT’S DANCE and tonight’s invitation to the opera have made it official,” Sarah’s mother said as they travelled by carriage to the theatre. “The Duke of Brunswick is courting you, Sarah.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Sarah’s father muttered. “If you’re not careful you’ll wind up married to a man you do not care for, all because you were trying to help him.”

“Which in and of itself would suggest she cares,” Sarah’s mother said.

Sarah's father groaned and prayed aloud for God to save him from impossible women. Sarah on the other hand simply smiled. She was immensely pleased with the manner in which things were now progressing between herself and Brunswick. While his apology was commendable, it was his willingness to share a part of himself with her that made her feel truly triumphant. Granted, she'd still a lot more to learn. They were only at the beginning. But it was a start.

Whether she'd ever marry him however; that was yet to be determined.

"How has your day been?" Brunswick asked once they were comfortably seated in his box with him at her left and her mother to her right.

"Excellent. Although I was not thrilled with having to move my rabbit."

"You ought to have known I'd eventually find it," her mother said. "Honestly, the smell, Sarah. I can't imagine what you were thinking."

Sarah hadn't noticed a smell. At least not one strong enough to prompt her mother to investigate.

"I trust your mother was not aware you'd acquired a pet?" Brunswick asked.

"It's not a pet," Sarah said. "It's a rescue."

"All the more reason to keep it in the mews with the other animals," her mother said.

Sarah wanted to remind her that the *other animals* consisted solely of horses and wouldn't be appropriate companions for a small, helpless rabbit, but her father made a shushing sound, halting her comment. "The performance is starting."

Sarah sank back in her seat and tried not to feel too annoyed. Her parents knew she was passionate about this. She'd been saving animals most of her life, and she always made sure they didn't cause trouble for anyone else.

"Tell me about the rabbit," Brunswick whispered against her ear once the opera was well underway.

And so she did. She told him how she'd found it and brought it home, how she'd cleaned its wound, bandaged its leg, and fed it.

"Is this something you do a lot?" he asked once she was done with her tale. "Take in helpless animals and patch them up."

"It happens on occasion."

"On how many occasions?" he asked with a teasing lilt to his voice.

"On at least seven that I can think of. It all began with a puppy I found by the garden gate when I was eight years old. His ear was torn and he'd clearly not been fed for a while, the poor thing was so scrawny. So I took him to the kitchen and fed him." She smiled at the



memory. "Our cook at the time promised to keep quiet about it, but hiding a puppy is no simple task. Charles was the first to find out. He even offered to help and ended up becoming Mozart's designated walker. Even after Mama and Papa agreed to let me keep him."

"Do you have any other pets?"

"They're technically not pets." She lowered her voice even further. "My parents won't tolerate those on account of the shedding."

"I see," he said with a chuckle.

"How about you," she asked. "Have you ever had a pet?"

"Once, when I was a boy. My fa—"

Sarah watched his entire demeanor change, and she realized he'd spoken without thinking, only to be reminded of what he'd lost.

"Excuse me," he muttered and started to rise.

Once again he was trying to run, to distract himself so he would forget.

Sarah reached out and grabbed his hand. "Have you ever been to Kew Gardens?" she asked.

"No. I, um, actually—"

"Neither have I, but I hear it's quite splendid. Perhaps we could go together?"

Her suggestion had the desired effect. Brunswick smiled, his distress a moment earlier seemingly put to rest. "I must say, Miss Townsbridge, I've never been invited out by a lady before."

"As you've probably already realized, I am different from the norm. And besides, there's a first time for everything, Your Grace. Shall we say Thursday?"

"I can bring my carriage to pick you up at nine. Is that too early?"

"No. It's perfect." Immensely pleased with her ability to lighten his mood and ensure she'd see him again soon, Sarah turned her attention toward the stage while a smile played upon her lips.

It wasn't until later, when the lights came back on for intermission, that she realized she still held his hand.



STANDING BY HIS BEDCHAMBER window, Matthew stared into the night. He'd never particularly liked the opera. The only reason he'd suggested going was because he'd wanted to see Miss Townsbridge again in a different setting. That, and he'd wanted a chance to show her one of the benefits she would enjoy as his wife. His box was exceedingly comfortable and offered a particularly superb view of the stage. Her parents had commented on it, but the lady herself hadn't seemed to care. She'd been far more interested in chatting. And he, he had to admit, had been so enthralled that the three hour performance he'd dreaded had flown by in no time at all.

He placed his hand on the cool window pane and expelled a breath, allowing it to fog the glass. She wasn't far, just a stone's throw away, and he couldn't help but wonder what she was doing at that exact moment. Was she sitting up late enjoying a book, having a late night snack, or sleeping peacefully in her bed?

Closing his eyes for a moment, Matthew told himself not to care. It didn't matter what she did, if she liked to walk so fast that it felt like one's heart would fly from one's chest, whether she found the work he'd done on the folly impressive, or if she was keen on helping an injured animal back on its feet. The only thing of any importance at all was that she would make a suitable duchess and a good mother for his children. Anything more was too dangerous.

*It already is.*

*You look forward to seeing her.*

Just the mere thought caused his heart to race.

*Don't lose control.*

He wouldn't.

He'd been guarding his heart for nineteen years. Getting to know Miss Townsbridge did not equal falling in love with her. Heavens, he was much too sensible to let that happen. But he was also wise enough to admit that he ought to have some idea of who she was as a person - beyond what he'd learned during his selection process.

So he'd enjoy another outing with her. What possible harm could there be in that?

Happy with how things were going and his ability to keep control, he drew the curtains and climbed into bed without sparing Miss Townsbridge another thought. Or two. But no more than three.



"IT'S JUST AS PRETTY as I expected," Miss Townsbridge exclaimed a few days later as they walked through Kew Gardens. They were making their way toward a Chinese tower she'd heard of and wanted to see. This time, she'd brought a maid along with her. Anna was her name. She trailed behind at an appropriate distance, so he and her mistress could speak with each other discreetly.

"I see you've decided to temper your pace for a change."

"This park has a great deal to look at, Your Grace. The flower arrangements, for instance, are stunning. I fear I would miss most of it if we rushed."

He tilted his head, acknowledging her appreciation for her surroundings. "Tell me, if you could do anything in the world, what would it be?"

He wasn't sure where the question had come from, but the chance it gave him to learn more about her made him eager to know her

answer.

She seemed to consider her response with care before saying, "I think it would be grand if I were able to invent a cure for smallpox."

"Really?" He'd thought she'd say something far less serious, like that she would love to visit the pyramids or try to ride an elephant. But of course she wouldn't. This was Sarah Townsbridge, the woman whose greatest wish was to help those in need. He really should have known better.

"There used to be six of us, you see." She spoke with a wistful fondness, her voice conveying a loss wrapped in good and bad memories. "We Townsbridge children had another sister once. Claire was her name."

A chill scraped his bones. He knew how this story would end and it wouldn't be happily. And even though he hated the habitual words himself because they always seemed to fall flat, he couldn't help but say, "I'm so sorry."

"She was my identical twin," Miss Townsbridge said. "I was six years old when she got sick and died. Mama says the sickness took her quickly, but according to my recollection, it went on forever. I remember everything from that time in various shades of black and grey. The house was not the home it is today, but rather a monstrous emptiness trying to devour us all. There was no understanding or acceptance on my part. I hated God for taking Claire from me. In some ways, I still do."

"And yet you've managed to find peace beyond the grief." He marveled at her ability to overcome such loss when his own continued to cripple him.

"I had my family. They suffered too so I wasn't alone. And gradually, with time, I began to accept that nothing would ever be as it once was. Eventually, I moved on."

"Because you stopped thinking about her as often?"

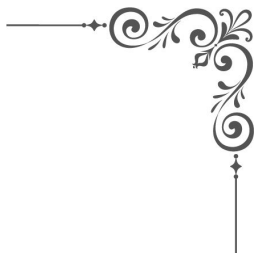
"Not at all. It was because I started talking about her, which prompted the others to join in, and soon, instead of this weight bearing down on my chest, I was able to smile over all the fun I'd had with Claire, if only for a brief time. I was blessed to have her in my life. We all were. I'll always miss her. I think it's the reason why I so often sit on the edge looking in, because I've never stopped feeling like half of me is missing, which is quite an awkward sensation to have. But it's what lets me know she's still with me. Right here." She placed her hand over her heart. Then before Matthew could say anything she grinned. "Oh look. I think there are games over there. Come on."

He quickened his pace to keep up with her, his mind still struggling to come to terms with what she'd just said. Surely there'd

been a reason for it. A person didn't bare their soul like that without cause. Did she know what had happened to him? Had she figured out why he felt the occasional need to flee?

His family's death would be noted in the most current volume of Debrett's. But few would make a connection. After all, it had been so long ago, most people would expect him to have gotten over it by now. But Miss Townsbridge wasn't most people. He was starting to suspect she saw a lot more than anyone realized. Being on the outside always looking in, as she'd put it, would have made her a keen observer.

Matthew shivered. He didn't want her digging around in his past or trying to save him. He wanted to keep the pain buried, and when it started to climb out of its hole, he wanted to stomp on it until it crawled back in.



## Chapter Five

SARAH WASN'T SURE IF her comments had made an impact. What she did know was that they needed a fun distraction from the tragic story she'd decided to relate. Reaching a wooden crate filled with balls, she grabbed two - one red and one blue - and handed the blue one to Brunswick.

"Do you have a good throw, Your Grace?"

He glanced toward the wooden board roughly twelve feet from where they stood on which five holes were marked with different points. "I think I can manage."

"Very good." She tossed him a cheeky grin. "Will you go first or shall I?"

He swept his arm toward the target. "By all means."

"All right then." She stepped toward a wooden plank laid out to mark the line behind which she was meant to stand, and aimed for fifty points. The ball struck the edge of the hole before dropping onto the ground with a disappointing thud.

*Blast.*

"Ambitious, I see," Brunswick murmured with a touch of humor. "Maybe you should have aimed for ten points instead."

"Tease me all you like," Sarah told him gamely as she stepped aside. "Let's see how you do."

"Very well." He stepped up to the mark, paused for a moment, then threw the ball forward. It shot straight through the twenty mark hole without even grazing the sides. Brunswick turned toward Sarah and smiled. "Did you get a good look just now, Miss Townsbridge? I do believe that was an excellent example of how it's *supposed* to be done."

She chuckled in response to his playful tone. "You truly are insufferable."

"Hmm. Your turn."

Sarah chose to do as he'd suggested earlier and aimed for the

largest hole in the board - the one worth ten points. This time, her ball sailed through the opening without a hitch.

"Well done, Miss Townsbridge," Brunswick applauded while she clapped her hands and made a small jump. She really didn't care if she'd taken the easy way out. All that mattered was that she'd met with success.

"You're very good at this," she told him later when it was clear who the winner would be. "I don't suppose you have a similar game at home where you've been secretly practicing in anticipation of this outing?"

He grinned, eyes sparkling with the sort of amusement she could get lost in for days. "Why, I do believe you've found me out."

She loved this easy, unrestrained side of him where he laughed and joked and behaved with carefree abandon. They finished the game and moved on to another where they had to hit a ball with a mallet, much like one would in a game of pall mall, so it rolled up a seesaw that caused it to tilt, allowing the ball to slide down the opposite side and drop into the waiting hole.

Sarah laughed when Brunswick's ball flew over the seesaw and past the hole. "You're hitting it too hard. A gentle hand is required here. Do step aside and allow me to show you."

And so she did.

He grumbled, tried a few more times, and eventually managed to get it right on his fifth attempt. "There we are. That wasn't so hard."

A snort of amusement escaped through Sarah's nose. "Certainly not, Your Grace. You truly are a champion among men."

His eyes met hers with considerable mischief. "I've always considered myself a paragon of sportsmanship."

"Indeed?"

Sarah smiled at him as they went on to the next game. She was immensely pleased with how the day was unfolding, and later, as they admired the view from the top of the Chinese tower, she allowed herself to sidle up closer to him. Even though they were never completely alone with Anna always somewhere nearby, Sarah felt as though they'd managed to tuck themselves away from the rest of the world for a while - as if here, with her, in this park, Brunswick had let his guard down completely.

"I've enjoyed our outing today a great deal," she confessed. "Thank you for agreeing to join me."

"It's been a pleasure." He gave her a sideways glance and she noticed a serious quality to his eyes now that hadn't been there before. Her heart skipped in anticipation of what he might say. If he proposed again, would she say yes? Mind racing she tried to stay calm, only to learn there'd been no need for concern when he said, "I

was wrong to think you'd marry me without becoming better acquainted first."

"Are you saying you're glad I turned you down?"

"No. I still think we could have made it work, but I don't think it would have worked as well as if we were to start out as friends."

"Friends, Your Grace?"

"I do hope you've come to regard me as such." He suddenly sounded uncertain.

Sarah gave him a warm and reassuring smile. "Of course. I, um...I like spending time with you."

"And I with you." He reached for her hand and raised it to his lips for a kiss that lingered much longer than what was deemed appropriate. "Perhaps we can meet again soon?"

"Yes," she agreed, perhaps more readily than she should have and certainly with her voice sounding too breathless for someone whose feet were still planted on solid ground.

As if noting the effect he had on her, the edge of Brunswick's mouth curved to form a purely wicked smile that sent sparks of heat dancing down her bare arms. Leaning in, he whispered, "I'm sure we can arrange for additional outings. A visit to Vauxhall could be fun. And eventually, if you dare, a private candlelight meeting at my folly."

Sarah swallowed while trying to tamp down the buzzing sensation that seemed to fan out from her belly. Her heart fluttered wildly as if anxiously seeking attention. She didn't feel like herself. In fact, she felt quite out of control and she somehow knew it had something to do with Brunswick's words and the way he'd phrased them, so seductively they seemed to flow through her body like molten lava.

"What you're proposing is—"

"Not to be talked of again until you're ready."

"But—"

"I still hope to marry you, Miss Townsbridge, but I'm not sure my pride can manage being turned down by you again." He drew back a little. Just enough for them to face each other more fully. "Let me know when you've made up your mind."



THE NEXT THREE WEEKS progressed in a similar manner. Matthew saw Miss Townsbridge every few days, either for a walk in Hyde Park - he was getting better at matching her pace - for afternoon tea with her parents, at a musicale where they both sat in the back so they could converse discreetly as they'd done at the theatre, during another ball where neither danced with anyone else - much to the delight of the gossips, and at Vauxhall.

Yet Miss Townsbridge never once gave any indication of wanting more. Certainly not something as serious as marriage. Oh, she'd blush when he leaned in to give her a compliment, and her voice would drop to this husky murmur that heated his blood whenever he touched her. Indeed, there was no doubt in his mind he stirred her senses, yet she still managed to keep him at arm's length.

The whole business was driving him mad.

Mostly because he was starting to fear his resolve. Hell, he wanted her in ways that terrified him - in ways he knew he could never allow no matter how much she tempted him with surrender. *Love*. The most dangerous feeling in the world. He had to resist it at all cost. He had to stay strong.

So when her parents invited him for dinner again, he turned the invitation down and remained home instead. A little reprieve was in order. He needed a chance to find his bearings, to focus on what was important here - the necessity of their eventual union instead of some fanciful romance invented by poets.

"You look like a wreck," David St. Nichols, Viscount Ottersbridge, told him when the two took a ride out of London one day. Matthew knew him from his time at Oxford. David had said something during one of Matthew's descents into misery, causing Matthew to lash out the only way he'd known how. They'd both thrown punches until they were lying side by side on the ground exhausted. Afterward, David had offered to buy Matthew a drink, and the two had been friends ever since. "I can't help but wonder if it's got something to do with that Townsbridge chit. According to the papers, you're making a great deal of effort to win her hand, which would explain why I've not seen you in recent weeks."

"She's turned me down twice."

"Ho! And yet you persist." David laughed as they guided their horses onto the West Road. "Either she's got you bewitched or you've sampled her goods and--"

"Shut up. It's nothing like that."

"Oh, I see. It's the wanting what you cannot have, then."

Matthew shook his head. "You know I've been wife hunting for two years. I considered everyone and eventually picked her. Starting over with the whole process strikes me as exhausting, so I'm trying to change her mind by letting her get to know me."

David cut him a skeptical look. "You don't let anyone do that. Hell, I don't even know what makes that brain of yours tick for the most part. And when it comes to your past--"

"I think I've managed to dissuade her from pressing that particular issue."

"So then?"



“We’ve gone fishing, played games, talked at great length, and danced. I showed her the folly, you know.”

“The monument to your suffering?” David snorted. “Good God, Matthew. If you’re not careful, she might fall in love with you.”

“That is what I’m aiming for.” When David gaped at him as if he’d gone mad, Matthew felt compelled to say, “It’s the only way I can think of ensuring her acceptance.”

“It’s a bloody diabolical way, if you ask me,” David said. “Getting a woman to fall in love with you when you have no plan of loving her back? Christ. I’ve never thought myself to be the softhearted sort, but even I’m getting queasy just thinking about it.”

Matthew tightened his hold on the reins and stared straight ahead. He couldn’t afford to feel guilty over this, and what good would that do anyway? Miss Townsbridge was of an age where she ought to get married. She wasn’t in love with anyone else. He wasn’t ruining her chance of a happy union. It was clear no other man had an interest. So then, what was the harm?

*You’ll break her heart and crush her spirit.*

No. He wouldn’t. She was a strong and capable woman. All he had to do was make sure she was too distracted to ponder the lack of his presence after the wedding. He’d make sure she had a whole zoo of animals needing her care, a dozen female companions for her to play games with, vast amounts of land on which to walk, and a pond where she could fish.

She’d be too preoccupied to think of him, let alone miss him. And on the few occasions when they met, he’d stop her from worrying over his absence by making love to her with zeal.

It wasn’t ideal, but it was the best he could offer. She’d have a good life - the sort of life other young women would envy. He urged his horse into a gallop, not caring if David was able to keep up or not.



THE NEXT TIME SARAH saw Brunswick, he was leaving a hothouse with a bouquet of flowers.

“Oh,” she exclaimed and promptly cursed herself for sounding like a dimwitted fool while her heart proceeded to flutter like mad. Which was perfectly nonsensical.

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. Of course he looked handsome as ever, which somehow seemed to vex her.

“Miss Townsbridge,” he said. “How serendipitous of us to meet here when I was intending to call on you forthwith.” He looked to her side and acknowledged her maid with a polite nod that only increased Sarah’s fondness for him.

“You were?” she asked, attempting to sound only mildly excited.

Lord, how she'd missed him these past few days. It was quite unreasonable and could only mean one thing.

She'd fallen in love and apparently the act had turned her into a fawning idiot.

He raised an eyebrow while she did her best to maintain her equilibrium. "Perhaps you will allow me to escort you home. If that is where you were heading."

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that." To her relief her voice sounded normal. "As long as you do not mind a short detour. I've a sudden craving for an ice and Gunter's isn't far."

She was in desperate need of immediate refreshment, something cool to soothe her agitated nerves and dispel the flush she could feel in her cheeks.

"Do you know, I've never had one before."

Sarah gaped at him. "You've never had an ice?"

"No."

"Not even as a child? Your parents never bought one for you?"

She recognized her mistake immediately and wished she could shove the words back in her mouth. What was she thinking, bringing up his childhood and his parents when she knew it would only remind him of loss?

"In any case," she told him brightly, hoping to quell the despair she knew would be sinking its teeth into him already. "You are in for a treat. The—"

"Perhaps some other time." He glanced around as if searching for an escape route. "It just occurred to me there's somewhere else I need to be."

When he shoved the flowers toward her, imploring her to take them, Sarah refused. Instead, she forced her hands to remain by her sides and tilted her chin up a notch in defiance. "I don't think there's anywhere more important than right here, right now."

His lips parted and he took a step back, shook his head while staring at her as if she presented his every worst nightmare come to life. "I'm sorry."

When he turned and started walking away, Sarah signaled her maid and went in pursuit. It was time for this to end, no matter how painful he found it.

"Lord Brunswick," she said when she was close enough for him to hear without her having to raise her voice. "Your Grace?"

Stubbornly, as if determined to put as much distance between them as possible, he kept on going, lengthening his strides until she was forced to make small running steps in between her own paces in order to keep up. Some people were starting to stare. Not that this part of Town was particularly crowded at this hour, but it was busy

enough for people to notice a lady chasing a gentleman down the street.

*Good lord.*

Sarah offered them all a tight smile and prayed the scene would not be described in tomorrow's paper alongside some ghastly caricature.

She sidestepped a merchant, almost collided with a lady exiting a shop, and hopped over a puddle. Really. Enough was enough.

"Matthew."

His head whipped round as he came to a halt. "Sarah?"

She puffed out a breath. "Considering the speed you were going just now, I'm surprised you struggled to keep up with me that one time in the park. Goodness, I think I'm getting a stitch."

"What are you doing?" He looked utterly bewildered, which was rather alarming.

Sarah grabbed hold of his arm and tried to appear as normal as possible. "Chasing you, apparently."

When he tried to pull away from her grasp, she tightened her hold and dug in her heels. He was stronger than she and perfectly able to wrench himself free if he wished.

Knitting his brow, he gave her a frustrated stare. "I'm not good company at the moment."

"Maybe not," she agreed, "but you cannot keep running away."

"I am not—"

"Least of all from me if you truly intend for me to be your wife." She gave him her firmest look. "You need to talk, Matthew, and I am—"

"No. There will be no talking, no trip down memory lane, no re-living the...the..."

A raspy sound came from his throat, filling Sarah with genuine concern. "Dear heavens. Are you all right?"

"I...I cannot..." He yanked his arm free from her grasp and began tugging at his cravat while coughing and gasping.

Sarah's blood froze in her veins. The man she loved was having a fit and she'd no idea how to help him.

Acting on pure instinct, she pushed his frantic hands away from his neck since he seemed to be struggling with the intricate knot his valet had tied. No longer concerned over who might see or how this public display of impropriety could affect her own reputation, she began undoing the tangled mess as quickly as she was able.

Who on earth had ever had the idiotic idea of wrapping lengths of linen about a man's neck? It was absolutely ridiculous and served no purpose at all as far as she could tell. Muttering an indelicate series of curses, she wove one end of the cravat in and out of two different

strips and was finally able to get some leeway. With a few more gentle tugs and a bit of careful unwinding, she had the cravat undone.

“Matthew,” she said. “Look at me. Can you breathe?”

He inhaled deeply, added a few short breaths, and eventually nodded. “Yes. Thank you. I don’t know what happened.”

“I think I do,” she told him softly. Taking him by the arm once more, she talked to him while leading him along. “We’ll cross the street up ahead. You’ll be back home in no time at all. Don’t worry.”

“I’m sorry, Sarah. I didn’t mean to ruin your afternoon like this. It’s completely unacceptable and...” He was quiet a moment before he admitted, “I’m quite embarrassed.”

“Think nothing of it. I had no real plans anyway, and even if I did, I would never abandon you when you’re not well.”

“I fear I’m not the most presentable gentleman at the moment,” he said when they’d walked a bit further. “Your reputation may not survive this.”

“It will if we marry.”

He stumbled slightly. “I beg your pardon?”

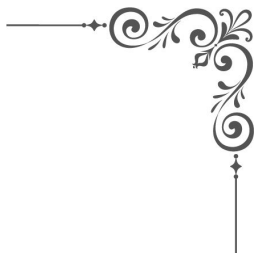
Sarah smiled. She’d been horribly shaken by what had happened. Her insides still trembled and her heart rate had not yet returned to normal, so it was nice to resume the familiar banter she enjoyed when they were together. “After everything I’ve put you through, I wonder if you would say yes if I were to propose to you.”

He coughed and she instantly glanced at his face to make sure he was not about to have a second attack. “You’ll have to ask in order to know.”

“Hmm...” They arrived at his townhouse where she waited patiently on the front steps for the butler to show up before even thinking of letting Matthew out of her sight. Addressing the older gentleman with a firm tone, she said, “Leave the garden gate unlocked please. His Grace has had a most strenuous afternoon, and I have every intention of making sure he is well cared for.”

“Miss Townsbridge,” Matthew protested.

“You and I need to speak,” she murmured. “And I don’t believe you want an audience while we do. So please, have your butler leave the gate open and I shall come find you. I promise.”



## Chapter Six

MATTHEW FLATTENED HIS mouth and gave a short nod of agreement. Knowing she'd already lingered outside a bachelor's home too long, Sarah walked away together with her maid and returned to her own house next door. Once inside, after divesting herself of her outerwear garments, bonnet, and gloves, she turned to Anna. "Needless to say, nothing you may have seen or heard this past hour is to be passed on to anyone else."

"Of course not, miss."

"Thank you." Sarah climbed the stairs and headed toward her bedchamber, only to be stopped by Athena when her door swung open as if she'd been listening at it in expectation of Sarah's return.

"What's going on?" Athena asked.

"Whatever do you mean?"

Athena narrowed her gaze on Sarah. "In case you've forgotten, my bedchamber window overlooks the street. So does Mama and Papa's, by the way, so you'd better hope neither of them saw you strolling along with a half-naked duke or they'll both be planning your wedding post haste."

"He wasn't half naked," Sarah hissed. When Athena merely raised her brows Sarah muttered a curse and said, "Come along then. I'll tell you what happened while I change."

While Anna helped her put on a more practical gown cut from courser brown cotton, Sarah related the events that had recently taken place.

Athena scrunched her nose as if in thought, then asked, "Have you fallen in love with him?"

"I believe so. Yes." Sarah sighed. "It was never my intention to do so and yet it happened anyway."

"Do you think he loves you in return?" Athena asked.

"I have no idea." Sarah met her sister's gaze. "He enjoys my company, that much I know."

“Well then, you’ll just have to work a bit harder at winning his heart.” Athena hopped off the bed and crossed the floor to Sarah’s dresser. Opening the box of trimmings on top, she pulled out a length of turquoise blue ribbon. “Here. You need something to brighten that drab gown you’ve chosen to wear. Even if you’re off to clip flowers in the garden or take care of that rabbit of yours out in the mews, you can do so in style.”

“Actually,” Sarah said while Anna helped fasten the ribbon around her abdomen, “I’m going to call on Brunswick.”

“So then,” Athena said, staring at her as if she were mad, “your intention is to make a bad impression? I thought you were hoping to win his affection, which is something you’re not very likely to do wearing that.”

“Athena. I am going alone, through the back garden entrance. This gown is meant to act as a sort of precaution in case someone happens to see me. Hopefully, if they do, they’ll just think I’m a maid.”

“Oh. I see. And I always thought *I* was the daring one. Do you suppose Mama and Papa realize you’ve got a rebellious streak?”

“Probably not.” Sarah shot her sister a look. “You won’t say anything to them, will you?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. Brunswick obviously needs my help and—”

“You’d like to kiss him better, dear sister?”

Sarah grabbed a small pillow and tossed it at her sister, who dodged the missile with ease. “I do intend to marry him, you know.”

“Of course you do.”

“I mean it, Athena.”

“Yes, so you’ve just said.” Athena moved to the door, turned and puckered her lips before exiting the room with a laugh when Sarah threatened to hurl one of her slippers at her head.

While her sister meant well and Sarah knew she was only doing what she did best, which was to alleviate tension by adding levity to the situation, Sarah couldn’t participate. Not when she knew Matthew had a serious issue that had to be dealt with. Whatever Athena suggested, she was going over there in order to offer support and to make sure he was all right, because she cared. To suggest it was anything else - an assignation of sorts - was appalling.

“Forget the ribbon,” Sarah told Anna. “I won’t be needing it.”

“Are you sure, miss? It does add a nice splash of color.”

“Thank you, but if I am to pass as a maid, a turquoise ribbon is hardly going to help.”

“Then you should wear a cap instead. If you truly wish to disguise yourself.”

Sarah agreed and ten minutes later she was walking toward the

back of the garden. Anna had promised to do her best to cover her absence in case her parents inquired about her, but since it was late afternoon and Sarah usually rested in her bedchamber at this hour, she didn't think she'd be missed. At least she hoped she wouldn't be.

Reaching the green wooden gate leading out into the back alley beyond, Sarah paused. Her heart thumped wildly with agitation while her stomach twisted until she felt slightly queasy. The idea of pretending to be a maid had seemed simple enough upstairs in her bedchamber when she'd been getting ready. Now, faced with the real possibility of encountering one of the grooms as they entered or exited the nearby mews, she wasn't so sure it would work.

They knew her by sight, after all. She'd been coming there every day for the last week to care for the rabbit after her mother had banished it from the house.

Swallowing, Sarah glanced over her shoulder toward the safety of her home. She could still go back, get changed, and move on with her day without much risk of being found out. But then what about Matthew? Tightening her grip on the basket she'd brought along, she opened the gate and exited her garden. If the incident he'd suffered earlier wasn't addressed immediately, chances were he'd find a way to avoid discussing it altogether. And she knew she had to make him open up about it if he was to stand a chance of recovering from the pain he'd suffered so long ago, and she was to truly understand him.

Inhaling deeply, she stepped forward and moved briskly past the mews while keeping her face carefully turned to one side, away from any grooms who might be working.

Terrified of being spotted, she reached for the gate leading into the Brunswick garden, pulled it open, and slipped through as quickly as she could. Thankfully, the butler had done as she'd asked. She blew out a breath and took a moment to get her bearings. A narrow walkway wound around the folly Brunswick had built. Following it, Sarah circumvented the structure and spotted him almost immediately. He'd shucked his jacket and waistcoat and rolled up his shirtsleeves, allowing a rather inappropriate view of bunched muscles straining in response to the massive stone slab he hefted into place.

Mouth dry, Sarah watched in speechless dismay - gawking at him, some might say - while he made sure the stone was secured. He stepped back and stretched. Good lord. She had the strangest urge to reach out and run her hands over his torso, to feel the strength she could see in his movements.

He turned before she was ready. "Miss Townsbridge."

"How are you feeling?" she asked while trying not to think too much of the fact that he'd just caught her staring.

"Fine."

“Are you sure?”

He frowned at her. “Of course I’m sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Perhaps because you were getting strangled by your cravat a short while ago?”

He turned away with a snort and picked up another massive rock. “Happens on occasion. I’ve never enjoyed tying fabric around my neck, but apparently it is considered vulgar not to do so.” Puffing out a breath of exertion, he set the stone on top of the other he’d placed. “Fashion is the most nonsensical thing in the world. Damned if I’ll ever understand it.”

“I quite agree.”

“You do?” He gave her a sharp look over his shoulder.

“Yes. But it’s not why I’m here.” Stiffening her resolve, she said, “I want to discuss the reason behind your reaction this afternoon.”

“There’s nothing to discuss besides the obvious.”

“And that would be?”

“As you’ve already noted, my cravat is a dangerous contraption.” He glanced toward the sky. “Perhaps I should file a complaint against the man who invented it.”

Sarah sighed while he went back to his work. “While I generally enjoy a bit of levity, this is serious, Matthew. Whenever something reminds you of the loss you once—”

Without a word, he walked away like she’d seen him do several times before. Gripping her basket harder, she marched through the folly’s archway so she could block his path when he came from the other direction. “You’re running away again. Matthew, I understand the extent of your pain, but I cannot bear watching you deal with it like this.”

His mouth began twisting into a snarl, but rather than push back and fight her, he turned away once more. Determined not to give up, Sarah raced around to the other side of the folly, arriving just in time to cut him off again.

He drew to a halt, his body tensing as if he wished he could toss her aside and storm off. Sarah watched his fists clench and his eyes spark with contained fury. “Who do you think you are, Sarah, coming here and making demands?”

“I am the woman who plans on becoming your wife. But only,” she told him pointedly, “if you’re willing to let me into your life.”

“Sarah,” he hedged while his shoulders slumped a notch. “I’m not sure you—”

“Listen to me.” Now that she finally had his attention, she needed to keep it. Maintaining a firm tone, she added, “I grew up in a home filled with love and laughter, with parents who treated each other respectfully and who taught me the value of communication.



Matthew, I know you've suffered tremendous loss, and based on what I've witnessed, you continue to do so."

"If you came here hoping I'd open up, I'm afraid I must disappoint you." He shifted as if prepared to move past her.

She reached out and grabbed his arm. "Tell me what happened. From the beginning."

"No." He shook his head and turned away. "Some things are best forgotten."

"What was your mother like?" Sarah asked without remorse while dogging his every move. "Did she read stories for you when you were a boy? What about your father? I'm sure he must have shown you how to ride or perhaps how to whittle? And what did your siblings--"

He rounded on her, forcing her back a step with his dark glare. "Stop it!"

"No."

A large hand curled around her upper arm with bruising force. Pulling her sideways, he pushed her up against the folly's wall and pinned her there while his body seemed to tremble with unleashed rage. "You don't know what you're asking of me - what you're forcing me to face."

"I know you've been trying to bury your grief most of your life without dealing properly with it."

"Grief? Is that what you think this is?" Leaning in, he made a low growl. "There are demons that nip at my shadow and keep me from sleep. They're ugly and all too eager to drag me down into the pit of despair where they want me to live. That's what I'm fighting, Sarah - the memory of my parents and older brothers setting off for Oxford without me because I was too young to join them. Of them not heeding my warning about the weather because they knew better. I was ten years old. Ten! And yet I was forced to see them after the accident, forced to inhale the sweet smell of honeysuckle strung up to mask the stench of death. Because as my grandparents said, I needed to face reality. Can you imagine what that was like? Dear God, my sister's forehead had a deep gash that the undertaker had not been able to hide while my mother..."

He dropped his gaze while breathing hard, as if fighting for inner control. Sarah held herself perfectly still while absorbing the horror of what he described.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "No one should have to endure that. Least of all a child."



IT FELT AS THOUGH SHE'D forced open a box he'd struggled so damn hard to keep shut for almost two decades. Part of him hated her for it.

The other was doing its best to shove the memories back inside as quickly as possible so he could lock them up.

Shaking with anger and pain, he raised his gaze to hers. There was an almost perverse appreciation to be found in the apprehension he saw in her eyes. She knew she'd pushed him further than she should have, so while it might be wrong to take advantage - to use her as the distraction he needed - he also felt she owed him.

Perhaps this wasn't how it should have been. It probably wasn't the best way in which to secure her hand in marriage. There certainly wasn't an ounce of romance involved, just a need to block out the past in the most basic way he knew how. So he didn't ask for permission, didn't think of what the potential consequence might be for his intention to make her his wife. He just acted on instinct and claimed her mouth with his own in a kiss meant to punish her for what she'd done while helping him take back control.

A gasp was her first response, no doubt due to shock.

She was a gently bred woman after all and he was taking liberties in a way no well-mannered gentleman would think of doing. It was reprehensible really. He knew he was being a bastard. Especially since he felt no regret. Instead, all he felt was her softness, inviting him closer and driving a need he'd not even realized he had.

It was more than a need to vanquish the unwelcome thoughts she'd stirred to life. It was a need for contact, a need to feel something besides the soul-crushing pain. It was a need to bask in the sweetness and beauty she offered - a need to be held.

His hand settled briefly against her waist before sliding over her hip. Fingers splayed, he tested each pliable curve while pushing for more - for a deeper kiss with less space between them - an intimate taste of her mouth. He kissed her as if he were dying and she were his only salvation. Unstoppable, he drank from her like a man who'd just crossed the desert to find a fresh spring. Mindless, his hands gripped her closer, tighter. They moved over her, exploring her body until...

Until he realized something that almost brought him to his knees. She was kissing him back.

She was kissing him back while clutching at him as if he were her lifeline. Her fingers dug deep into his shoulder and raked through his hair with a wild abandon so thoroughly thrilling he nearly lost his mind. And then she made a small sound - a mewl of pleasure so damn provocative it undid every reason he'd had for the kiss to begin with, and turned it into a primal display of want.

Never in his life had he been so bloody affected by a woman. Somehow, the quietly reserved miss he'd picked because he'd been sure she would wield no power over him was tempting him with dastardly ideas of taking her upstairs right now to his bedroom and

stripping her naked. Better yet, he could save the trip and have her right here up against the stone wall. Lord knew he was ready and if the tilt of her hips and the desperate whimpers she kept making were any indication, so was she.

It wouldn't take much. He just had to lift up her skirts and undo his placket. She had said she'd be his wife, so what did it matter if they allowed themselves to get carried away before the wedding? Surely the pleasure he gave her would only serve as extra incentive to wed?

Kissing his way along the length of her neck, he tugged on her sleeve so he could press hot, searing kisses upon her shoulder. Moving lower, he dragged down the edge of her bodice and bent his head for a taste of her sweetest perfection.

"Matthew."

Her voice was a sensual whisper, enough to spur him on even if she hadn't been clutching him, demanding he give her more. So he did, even as her hands found their way inside his shirt, the heat of her palms almost searing his skin as they moved across the expanse of his back. A groan rumbled through him. No turning back now. He grasped at her skirt, bunching the fabric and pulling it upward, his need for her so overwhelming it had to be tamed in the only possible way.

She didn't resist, but rather moaned with unfeigned longing the moment his hand grasped her naked thigh. "Please. I just...I..."

"Shh... It's all right, Sarah." He moved his hand higher. "I know what you need."

"God, Matthew." He raised his head and her eyes met his, so open, so honest, so achingly pure. "I love you."

Every muscle contracted. He froze. With her skirt almost all the way up to her waist and one hand splayed across her bare bottom, he stood, unable to move. It was the strangest most awful thing he'd ever experienced - like having a fully functioning mind imprisoned inside a paralyzed body. Every nerve ending he possessed clamored for him to make a decision. He had to act, and to do so he had to fight the instinct that told him to run. Because if he did, she would know he couldn't accept or return such affection, and once she knew, he was fairly certain he'd lose her.

So he forced himself to remain in place, not to act with haste but to simply breathe while recovering from the splintering shock of her declaration. Slowly, so as not to cause her alarm, he removed his hand and let her skirt fall back into place. Leaning in for good measure, he placed a soothing kiss against the base of her neck while adjusting her bodice.

"Please, Sarah," he murmured, hoping and praying he didn't sound nearly as terrified as he felt, "you must forgive me for being so bold. I

fear I forgot myself and my manners.”

She answered with a shy smile. “It’s quite all right. As I recall, I didn’t exactly try to talk you out of it.”

“No. You did not.” He forced a wry grin - one he hoped would mask the panic he had to endure with every beat of his heart. “I never imagined you would be so enthusiastic, and before you get the wrong idea, I should tell you I’m very pleased to discover this passionate side of you. It bodes well for our wedding night.”

“And for our marriage as a whole, I should think.”

Unable to be completely dishonest, he made a noncommittal sound and took a step back. He needed space - a great deal of it - but he also had to stop her from getting suspicious, so he set about tucking his shirt in and putting himself back to rights. “We should probably start making the necessary arrangements. If you agree, I will call on your father tomorrow to formally ask for your hand.”

She beamed at him with such unabashed pleasure, he wanted to punch himself straight in the face. Christ, she deserved better than what he could offer, but the idea of letting her go, of breaking things off and choosing another to mother his children, was utterly unthinkable. He could imagine no better woman for the job than Sarah. She was ideal and by God, he wanted her to be his, however selfish that was.

“If we start making plans now, we ought to be married by the end of October.”

He leaned in and kissed her. “Sounds perfect to me.”

A lovely blush colored her cheeks. “I almost forgot. This is for you.”

Matthew dropped his gaze to the basket she held toward him. Taking it from her, he pulled back the white cloth covering to find a collection of bread rolls along with a jar of jam.

Speaking past the sudden knot in his throat, he thanked her for her thoughtfulness.

“It seemed like a good explanation for my coming here in case someone saw me.”

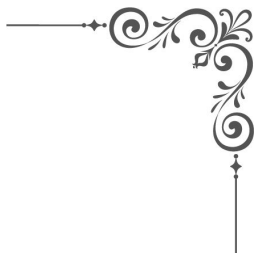
Of course. She’d risked so much in order to come here – to see to him and make sure he was well. Feeling awful, he told her gently, “I will escort you back so I’m there to help in case anyone gives you trouble.”

“That’s really not ne–”

“As your future husband, I absolutely insist.” Without waiting for her to argue the point, he set the basket aside, grabbed her hand, and led her back the way she’d come. While the need to protect her compelled him, there was also a strong desire to get her out of his garden as fast as possible so he could give his emotions free reign. So

although he experienced a brief pang of regret when he took his leave moments later, relief swiftly followed.

Returning to the folly, he snatched up the basket she'd brought, delivered it to the kitchen, and went back to work, pouring every piece of fear he harbored into each rock he carried.



## Chapter Seven

THE LAST THREE WEEKS had gone by in a whirl.

Sarah looked at herself in the cheval mirror while Anna adjusted the white lace bow at the back of her pale blue muslin gown.

"I cannot believe you are getting married today," Athena said from her position on Sarah's bed. "It will be odd to be the only child left."

"I'm sure Mama will manage to keep you busy," Sara said with a hint of mischief. "Prepare for her to corner you tomorrow with a list of suitors she'll want you to consider."

"Heaven help me," Athena groaned. "It really isn't fair. I'm two years younger than you, so I ought to be allowed at least that much time before I begin considering marriage. Perhaps I should visit Charles and Bethany for a month or two. After that, I can stay with James and Abigail for a bit before stopping by Will and Eloise and finally you and Brunswick."

"Sounds rather perfect, actually. By the time you've finished making the circuit, the next Season will have begun and Mama will be here waiting for you to step out and make a fantastic impression."

"Now I know you're teasing me, Sarah. I never make a fantastic impression on anyone. In fact, the last time I made any impression at all was rather disastrous."

Sarah set her mouth in a firm line and turned to face her. "That was years ago and it all worked out well in the end."

"I'm not sure Langdon, or rather, Darlington as he's now called, would agree," Athena grumbled.

Sarah wasn't sure either. The marquess had been Charles's good friend. He'd also been engaged to Bethany when Charles had met her. If it hadn't been for Athena, Bethany would have done the socially correct thing and married Darlington.

"He didn't love her, Athena. And she did not love him. It was to be a marriage of convenience and would have made at least two people desperately unhappy." Surely that ought to be some consolation.

“Maybe. I know Charles and Bethany are perfectly suited, and I’m glad they were able to end up together. In fact, I dare say that in spite of the scandal I caused, I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Sarah smiled. “I know you would. You’re a romantic, Athena, and you cannot bear to see those you love heartbroken.”

“It’s true,” Athena said. She bit her lip. “But I still feel guilt over what Darlington went through. He was humiliated in front of so many people. I’m sure he still hates me. Wherever he is.”

There was probably little doubt about that, Sarah mused. It had been six years since the incident, and as far as she knew, none of them had seen or heard from Darlington since. It was as if he’d disappeared off the face of the earth.

“Never mind him,” Sarah said. Today was her wedding day and while she knew Athena did not relish going to church, she was determined for her to find some joy in it. “There are far more important matters for you to consider right now, like your lack of a perfectly crafted primrose hairpin.”

Athena gave her a puzzled look while Sarah went to retrieve a small box from her dressing table. She handed it over and watched as Athena pushed open the lid to discover the yellow enamel petals surrounding a golden center.

“This is stunning,” Athena said as she picked the pin up and held it between her fingers for closer inspection. “Thank you, Sarah.”

“I’ve always believed yellow to be your color. It suits your vibrant spirit.”

Athena stood and gave Sarah a hug after which Anna helped place the hairpin. Once this had been accomplished, Sarah gave herself one final look in the mirror before leaving her bedchamber to embark on her life’s greatest journey yet. She hadn’t made any further attempts at getting Matthew to open up about the pain he’d once suffered. He’d told her enough for now, enough to fill her head with bone-chilling images of his younger self being made to look at the lifeless remains of his family, and enough to let her know that he was dealing with far more than grief. It would in all likelihood take a lifetime to undo the damage that had been done to his mind. Along with a great deal of patience and endless amounts of love.

Sarah wasn’t too worried, because after today, she would be able to give him all three.



A DEEP SENSE OF RELIEF and rightness filled Matthew’s chest, allowing his heart to beat with greater ease than ever before. He’d done it. Somehow, in spite of her initial aversion toward him, he’d managed to make Sarah Townsbridge his wife.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"No. Not at all. Quite the opposite."

Jittery apprehension had tripped through him while he'd waited for her at the church. His stomach had felt like a maelstrom, spinning around and tumbling over until she'd appeared. And then, from that moment on, every disquiet within him had settled. She'd been stunning and, to his immense satisfaction and detriment, she'd looked overjoyed - radiant - with a beaming smile and sparkling eyes directed solely at him.

*I love you.*

The words had haunted him every second of every day since she'd said them. Even now, they threatened to reignite the self-loathing he'd struggled with until the vows had been spoken, the deed effectively done with no way back save for a swift annulment. There would be no such thing. Not after the night they were going to share once he got her out of her lovely gown. Already, the thought of what was about to transpire heated his blood and tightened his muscles. He'd dreamt of it countless times since their interlude in the garden.

Setting his empty glass of port aside on the dresser, he removed his jacket and began untying his cravat.

Sarah stared at him while her cheeks turned a bright shade of pink. She sipped the remainder of her drink - a bit of fortification he'd offered to calm her nerves. Only she wasn't really nervous. Was she? He knew her well enough by now to be able to tell, and what he detected was closer to anticipation and curiosity, which only ignited his own desire further.

The cravat came loose and he tossed it aside, then went to work on his waistcoat buttons. Holding her gaze, he shucked the garment, untucked his shirt and pulled it over his head in one fell swoop. She licked her lips, and his stomach clenched.

"You're stunning," she said, allowing her gaze free roam to inspect every inch of his naked torso. Moving closer to where he stood, she paused and raised one hand to within an inch of his chest, allowing it to hover there while her eyes snapped back to his. "May I?"

Matthew could only nod.

And then her fingertips brushed the skin above his sternum in a slow downward stroke. He sucked in a breath as they travelled lower, exploring the ridges of his abdominal muscles before smoothing over his arms and shoulders.

"I never imagined a real man could be so sculpted, but you are as well defined as the Greek gods described in the myths I used to read as a child." Her eyes met his while she placed her palm over his heart. "My very own Hercules brought to life. Forged, I believe, from years of strenuous work."



Matthew swallowed while doing his best to maintain his carefully held control. Her words were soft, her touch exquisite, and she herself as tempting as a siren. If he wasn't careful, she'd be his undoing. And yet, he had no choice but to lower his mouth to hers and savor the pleasure he found in her kiss.

She was his, even if he could never fully be hers, and he was about to take advantage.

Denying the crisis of conscience attacking his soul, he swept his arms around her and held her close, drowning himself in the ecstasy she offered - allowing himself to forget. His fingers tugged the bow loose at the back of her gown, then worked the fastenings so the dress could slip from her shoulders without resistance.

When it pooled at her feet, he spun her around, kissing the side of her neck while undoing her stays. The garment fell to the floor, followed soon after by her chemise. Casting a glance at his cheval mirror, Matthew let himself feast on his wife's incredible beauty. Perfectly curved and proportioned, she was everything he'd dreamed of and more.

Inhaling the sweet scent of roses that clung to her hair, he gave his hands all the freedom they craved to explore. She didn't resist. Instead, she leaned back against him and sighed in response to his touch.

"Sarah." He could not stop from whispering her name.

Her gaze met his in the glass and his desire flared. Seeing her like this, dressed in only her stockings and slippers while giving herself up to his ministrations, was without doubt the most alluring thing he'd ever witnessed. It unleashed a possessive streak within him the likes of which he'd never known.

Driven by need, he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her down gently, then stepped back so he could continue undressing. She watched while he toed off his shoes and kicked them aside, while he pulled off his hose and then straightened. His body was so damn tense it pulsed with energy, causing his fingers to tremble while they worked the buttons that held his placket.

"Would you like me to help with that?" Sarah asked.

Rough laughter escaped his throat. "As much as I value your practical nature, I fear it will cut our evening short if I let you apply it right now."

She leaned back with the sort of seductive smile he'd not thought her capable of and watched with unashamed interest while he removed his trousers and smalls.

Her eyes widened. "Oh my."

He smirked while he prowled toward her. "I've every intention of making you say that a dozen times more before tomorrow."

Her lips parted as if she intended to say something else, but before she was able to do so he'd climbed onto the bed and positioned himself between her thighs. Pressing his mouth to hers in a kiss meant to scorch every cell in her body while driving away the brief pain he knew he would cause, he pushed forward with as much care and consideration as he could manage.

She gasped, tensing for a brief moment before relaxing once more. Stoking the fire inside her with each kiss and touch, he taught her how to move, how to ask for what she wanted, and finally how to let go.

Holding her gaze, he watched as she reached for the greatest sensation of all and then felt his own body strain in response to the oncoming rapture. It crashed through him seconds later with violent force, stealing the air from his lungs and robbing his body of strength. Never in his life had he experienced something so overwhelming, wonderful, or frightening.

He collapsed beside her, too afraid to ponder what it might mean.

Panting for breath, he lay there a moment while trying to steady the thunderous beats of his heart.

"That was incredible," Sarah said. She snuggled up close to him and draped one arm across his chest. "Is it always like that?"

"For the most part. Yes."

*Liar.*

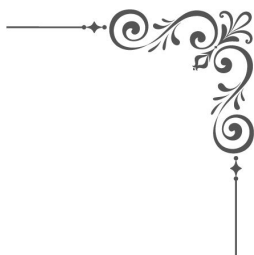
"Oh. Well. Since I don't know any better, I'll choose to believe it was something special."

Matthew forced his mouth shut to hold back the truth. Instead, he eased her arm away, sat up and went to fetch something for them to drink, anything to distract him from the effect his wife had just had on him. Because damn, he'd been with enough women in the past to know this wasn't normal. This...this was something else.

Shaking, he re-filled the glasses they'd set aside earlier and returned to the bed. He handed her one and allowed himself to take pleasure in watching her recline against the pillows while she drank. When they'd both finished their drinks and set their glasses aside, she pulled him in for a kiss so tender and sweet it nearly broke his heart.

"I love you, Matthew."

He knew she did. The only problem was, he could not allow himself to love her back.



## Chapter Eight

A WARM AND LANGUID sensation of pure comfort filled Sarah when she woke the next morning. Eyes closed, she allowed her consciousness to resurface while slowly letting the previous day's events sift through her mind. A smile touched her lips at the knowledge that she was now married to Matthew. It transformed into a wide grin as she recalled their incredible love making.

Although he'd told her the experience was always like that, she would forever look back on it as exceptional.

Stretching, she turned onto her side and opened her eyes in anticipation of watching her husband sleep, only to find his side of the bed empty.

Sarah blinked, brushed the sleep from her eyes, and pushed herself onto her elbows. The clothes they'd left strewn about on the floor had been gathered and folded in a neat pile on the bench at the foot of the bed. Blowing out a breath, she tried not to feel too disappointed by Matthew's absence. They'd only spent one night together after all. She'd yet to discover his sleeping habits. Maybe he was an earlier riser than she.

Allowing herself a slow stretch first, she got out of bed and went to inspect the clock on the fireplace mantle. To her surprise, it was almost ten o'clock. Good heavens. She couldn't recall the last time she'd risen so late. No wonder Matthew was gone. He'd probably been awake for hours.

Eager to find him, she put on a clean chemise and rang for Anna to assist her. Time was wasting, precious seconds she longed to spend in Matthew's company.

But when she entered his study after taking a quick peek at the parlor, she found the room empty.

Hmm...

"May I be of assistance?" an inquisitive voice asked.

Sarah turned to face Friedrieichsen, the butler. "I'm looking for my

husband. Do you know where I might find him?"

"Ah...I'm afraid not." Friedriechsen kept all emotion carefully tucked away behind a typically butlerish expression. "Perhaps you would care for some breakfast, Your Grace?"

"Certainly. I must confess I am rather hungry."

"If you'll please follow me." He led her into the dining room which she was surprised to see now contained a table surrounded by twelve chairs along with a couple of tall cabinets. As if reading her mind, Friedriechsen said, "His Grace had the space furnished in anticipation of your arrival."

"Lovely." Sarah stepped inside and quickly noted that there was only one place setting. She glanced at the butler. "I trust my husband already ate?"

Friedriechsen inclined his head in a noncommittal manner that wasn't the least bit helpful. "George and Albert will attend you," he said in reference to the two footmen who stood at the ready next to the wall. "I'm sure Mrs. Carver, the housekeeper, will want a word with you once you are ready."

In other words, the staff expected her to get on with her duties. Sarah sighed, thanked Friedriechsen for his help, and went to claim her seat, which was when she discovered a folded piece of paper bearing her name tucked beneath her cutlery.

Sarah's pulse leapt. It could only be from Matthew - perhaps a note of affection, or an invitation to join him after her meal? She waited impatiently for the footmen to finish serving her and to retreat to their positions by the wall before letting herself read what Matthew had written.

Her heart instantly sank. There were only two lines, neither containing one reference to the wonderful night they'd shared in each other's arms, the joy he felt over their marriage, or any suggestion for them to savor the romance of newly wedded bliss in each other's company. Instead it read: *Urgent business has called me away. I will return as soon as I am able.*

No indication of what the business might be or where he'd gone, not even a *hope to see you soon* or an *affectionately yours* accompanying his name.

It was so blunt and distant it made Sarah lose her appetite. Nevertheless, she forced herself to eat some eggs and bacon and washed it down with hot tea. Unhappiness wouldn't do any good. She was the Duchess of Brunswick with a household to run now that Matthew was gone. It was probably best if she got on with it, not only because she wanted to earn the respect of the servants by proving herself capable, but also because keeping busy would stop her from worrying overly much about whether or not Matthew might have used

*business* as an excuse to escape her.

"Have you still had no word from him?" Sarah's mother asked two weeks later.

Sarah had invited her to see the progress she'd made with the parlor. The walls had been painted a soothing shade of sage green which nicely complemented the darker moss-colored curtains. A few carefully selected paintings had been hung on the walls and a table placed in one corner to hold a vase filled with flowers.

It was still simple without being too masculine or feminine. The furniture, aside from the corner table, remained the same so Sarah hoped Matthew wouldn't oppose the few changes she had made.

"No," she told her mother while selecting a biscuit. "I'm sure he's very busy."

"In my opinion his behavior is inexcusable," Mama said. "No man is so busy he cannot afford the time required to pen a few words to his new wife."

Sarah was inclined to agree. She'd certainly thought as much herself. But nothing in the world would ever compel her to show a lack of support for her husband, so rather than conceding her mother's point, she said, "He may well have done so, Mama. Considering the amount of time it would take a letter to reach me if he's gone north, two weeks is not so very long. Especially if he did not write me straight away."

"I suppose that's true. He does have that estate up near the Scottish border, so if that is where he has gone, it could take another week for his letter to reach you."

Smiling to put her mother at ease, Sarah nodded. She chose not to mention that he could have sent a letter from one of the posting inns he would have stopped at. When she'd asked Friedriechsen if he knew where the duke had gone, the butler had not been able to offer any further information. Neither could Matthew's secretary, Mr. Sheffield, or his valet, Mr. Albertson. Nobody knew where Matthew was. They simply assured her he probably had matters of great importance to see to and that he would return once they'd been resolved.

But when another two weeks came and went without any word from him, Sarah grew increasingly worried. Surely this wasn't typical behavior for a husband. Her mother had said it wasn't, but she and Sarah's father had always had an uncommonly close bond, so perhaps she'd commented from that standpoint. And since Sarah had no wish to discuss the intricacies of her marriage with anyone, or betray Matthew's trust by revealing the issues she knew he still dealt with, she hadn't asked her sisters-in-law for their opinions.

Her unease grew as additional days went by. It became harder to explain his continued absence without lying. It didn't help matters

that she now knew without a doubt that she carried his child.

Uneasy and desperate to talk things through with him, to share the impending joy of parenthood with him instead of allowing loneliness and the sense of abandonment to swamp her, Sarah pondered her options. Five weeks had passed since their wedding and it was high time she faced reality. Matthew had fled. Perhaps it had been the intimacy of their wedding night, perhaps the words of love she'd spoken. Whatever the case, it hardly mattered. The only important thing was he'd left her, and while she acknowledged the threat of tears this realization brought, she refused to cry.

Instead, she located a travelling trunk and called for Anna to help her pack. Matthew had four estates. She would visit every damn one of them until she found him. And God help him when she did, because no matter what he'd been through or how frightened he might be of opening his heart and letting her in, this sort of behavior was not to be born.



EVEN THOUGH HIS VIEW was blurred by thick drops of November rain, Matthew stood in the room he'd been renting at Mivart's Hotel for more than a month and stared out the window. He was an ass. There was no doubt in his mind about that or the fact that he desperately missed Sarah.

Registered as Mr. Donovan to preserve his anonymity with the hotel staff, he'd spent the last weeks in solitude. Forcing himself to delve into his past, to reflect on every painful detail and face his demons, he'd finally come to a startling conclusion: running away didn't help. It never had. If anything, it only ever served as a brief distraction from the torment.

Casting a glance over his shoulder, he surveyed the empty decanters and various glasses he'd used to dampen the pain. Christ, he'd been foxed. Scrubbing one hand over his jaw he decided he needed a shave. That, and some clean clothes. Perhaps even a haircut if he were being completely honest.

One thing was for sure, though. It was time to go home, time for him to be the husband Sarah deserved, to trust her to give him the help he'd been too blind to realize he needed.

It was time to tell her he loved her.

Acknowledging the emotion had probably been the hardest thing of all. He'd always been so determined never to love anyone ever again, to never put himself in a position where the possibility of loss would slowly kill him. Only now it occurred to him that in doing so he'd stopped living.

It was time for all that to change.

With a renewed sense of purpose, he took half an hour to make the room a bit more presentable, then wrote a note to his valet and called for a servant to make sure it got delivered. Albertson arrived within the hour and went straight to work on improving Matthew's appearance.

"How is my wife?" Matthew asked while the valet ran the shaving blade down the side of his neck.

Silence followed.

Matthew frowned while a smidgen of unease crept up the nape of his neck. "Albertson?"

Albertson cleared his throat and rinsed the blade in the bowl of water he held. "It is my understanding that Her Grace departed for Sunderland Hall this morning.

"What?"

"If you would please hold still for a moment, Your Grace, I've yet to complete the other side."

Matthew sat as if frozen. His mind reeled with possibilities while his heart hammered and a painful knot twisted his insides. "Did she say why she chose to go there?"

"I believe she went in search of you."

"Damn it, Albertson. Why didn't you say so?"

"I did not think it my place, Your Grace. Now please hold still so I do not nick you."

"Fine. Just make it quick, will you. I've got to get going and—" He glanced at the window. Rain pelted down outside, more heavily than before, instilling in him a sense of dread so fierce it almost left him immobile. "This is not good weather for travel."

Propelled by the same sort of uneasy feeling he'd had when he'd watched his parents and siblings ride off, Matthew stood, pushed Albertson aside, and snatched up his jacket. He'd been a child back then. No one had listened to his words of warning about the weather. They'd had a schedule to keep.

Well, he was an adult now and he would be damned if any harm came to his wife because he'd been too selfish and foolish not to stay by her side.

"Your Grace. I'm not finished," Albertson said in a rush while following Matthew to the door. "I still have to—"

"Never mind any of that," Matthew said. He flung open the door and stormed into the hallway not caring if he looked unkempt or deranged. "The only thing that matters right now is getting my wife home. Everything else will have to wait."

He raced down the stairs, bounding over several steps at once until he finally reached the foyer. He didn't care that he'd forgotten his hat and his gloves. The only thing that signified was acquiring a horse as

fast as possible so he could go after Sarah.

Ignoring the whispers and stares from the people he passed, he made for the front door and pulled it open so fast he collided with a man who was trying to enter.

“Brunswick?”

Matthew gave the man a closer inspection and instinctively cursed before clearing his throat. Damn his rotten luck for bumping into Sarah’s eldest brother of all people. “Mr. Townsbridge.”

Mr. Charles Townsbridge, having seemingly recovered from the shock of encountering Matthew here, frowned. “Where the hell have you been and what was so important you had to abandon my sister the day after your wedding?”

“I, um...” Matthew looked around, frantically searching for some quick means of escape. “I have to go.”

“Hold on one moment.” Mr. Townsbridge’s frown deepened while he gave Matthew a closer inspection. “Unkempt appearance. Ruffled clothes. No hat or gloves. By God, man! Have you been staying here all this time while she thought you had travelled on business?”

“No. Well, yes. I mean—”

“Which. Is. It?”

“I really don’t have time for this, Townsbridge. I have to find my wife.”

“And so you shall. Right after this.”

The force of his brother-in-law’s fist landing squarely against his jaw made him stagger. A burning ache spread through his cheekbones, leaving no doubt in his mind it would bruise. Gasps could be heard from those who’d witnessed the altercation.

“Pull yourself together,” Mr. Townsbridge snapped while flexing his fingers. “You look a damn fright.”

“No thanks to you,” Matthew grumbled even though he knew well enough he’d deserved the blow. “Now I really must go. My valet just informed me your sister set out along the North Road this morning. Apparently, she believes I’m at one of my four estates and has determined to find me.”

“Christ, you’re an idiot.”

“I won’t dispute that, but right now I must—”

“Tell Mr. Partridge that Mr. Townsbridge won’t make the meeting after all, would you please?” Mr. Townsbridge told the clerk behind the front desk.

“Very good, sir,” the man said. He stood and waved for another man to approach.

“And also,” Mr. Townsbridge continued, “I need a note sent to Number Ten Berkley Square informing my wife that I have travelled with the Duke of Brunswick and that I shall be home as soon as I can.”



"I'll see to it," the clerk assured him.

"Excellent." Mr. Townsbridge handed the man a few coins and stormed back outside into the pouring rain with a, "Let's go," directed at Matthew.

Matthew hurried after him toward a black, unmarked carriage. Instructions to take the North Road were delivered to the driver together with an order to stop at every posting inn they passed along their way. As soon as this had been accomplished, Mr. Townsbridge climbed into the vehicle. Matthew followed. His already soggy clothes clung to his body. Cold wetness started to pool beneath him on the bench. A shiver raked his entire frame. If only he'd thought to bring a greatcoat.

"Don't look to me for sympathy," Mr. Townsbridge said when Matthew happened to catch his gaze. "In my opinion you deserve a good bout of influenza - the sort that will keep you teetering at death's door for a couple of days before you recover."

"How magnanimous of you to hope I survive."

"Don't think for one moment I wish you well for your own sake," Mr. Townsbridge murmured. "I simply don't wish for my sister to be made a widow."

"Of course." Matthew gave his attention to the window and the grey exterior beyond. Even though he was finally doing something - acting, as it were - he'd never felt more out of control. His heart beat frantically while tension gripped him so tight he could barely breathe.

"Would you please stop that?" The startling sound of Mr. Townsbridge's voice after nearly two hours of silence made Matthew flinch. "Tapping your foot will not make this carriage move the least bit faster. If anything, it will only increase my desire to strangle you."

"She told me she loved me," Matthew stated. It seemed so ridiculous now that those words had scared him away when they ought to have done the opposite. "I'm afraid I panicked."

"Hmph. Well, I don't suppose you'd be the first man to do so, but bloody hell, Brunswick. You've been gone for over a month without a word. And all the while you've been cooped up a mere mile away from your house. You'll have to forgive me for not understanding what in God's name you were thinking."

"Sarah will," Matthew muttered. Whether or not she'd be capable of forgiveness was quite another matter.

Mr. Townsbridge just gave him a baffled look and shook his head. The silence between them resumed until they reached the first posting inn. Matthew almost tore the carriage door off its hinges as soon as they rolled to a halt. He leapt down onto the muddy ground and ran inside the establishment only to learn that the Brunswick carriage had

indeed passed there a few hours prior but that it had stopped only for a change of horses.

Swearing so violently the innkeeper raised both bushy eyebrows, Matthew returned to the carriage and related the information to Sarah's brother. "It will be late before we catch her. Perhaps you would like to return home while I continue the search?"

Mr. Townsbridge gave him a hard stare, then slowly nodded. "You'll move faster if you hire a horse to ride. Is a good one available?"

Matthew went to inquire and was instantly shown to the stables where he picked out a fine looking stallion. When he returned to the carriage with the horse, Mr. Townsbridge stepped down and removed his greatcoat.

"Take this," he told Matthew as he flung the garment across his shoulders. "It will hopefully keep you from getting wetter."

Matthew thanked him and mounted the horse while Mr. Townsbridge climbed back inside his carriage. Before he closed the door, Matthew hastened to add, "I promise to bring her home safely."

"See that you do."

The clipped remark was followed by the slam of the door. Matthew didn't wait to watch the carriage take off. He just gripped the reins and urged the horse straight into a gallop. Darkness would soon be upon them because of the thick clouds hovering low, and with no hint of the rain letting up any time soon, it became nearly impossible for him to see where he was going.

With water pelting his face like squalls coming in from the ocean, Matthew raced toward his next destination. Wind swept across the road in angry bursts, whipping his hair and hampering his pace. Making sure he kept to the side where potholes were less likely to occur and his horse less likely to stumble, he tore into the storm until his mount tripped to a halt and whinnied.

Dismounting, Matthew caught sight of the large object obstructing its movements. His heart slowed to a near stop. One of the horse's legs appeared to have gotten caught between the spokes of a broken off carriage wheel. Crouching, Matthew carefully eased the leg free while cold shivers rippled through him.

"She's all right," he quietly told himself. Lost carriage wheels weren't so odd. One happened upon them occasionally when travelling through the countryside. Rising, he led the horse forward a few paces to test its legs. The stallion tossed its head but seemed to be otherwise fine. Matthew placed one foot back in the stirrup, prepared to mount. And that was when he saw it - the dark irregular shape a bit further ahead.

Unwilling to move toward it, yet knowing he had to, Matthew

grabbed the horse by its reins and walked the fifty yards or so to the overturned carriage. Swallowing hard, he forced himself to approach the door. His throat was already closing, his eyes beginning to burn on account of the unmistakable Brunswick insignia staring him in the face.

*No.*

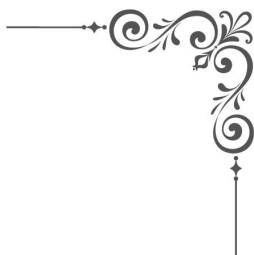
Tears mingled with the falling rain as he fought the pain squeezing his chest and reached forward, almost blindly pulling the door open so he could check the interior. For nineteen years he'd held them back, trapping them before they managed to fall and turning his back on the grief whenever it tried to confront him.

Gulping for air he searched for the bodies he feared he would find, but the space was empty. A sob of relief shook him and he allowed himself to survey the scene in closer detail. All personal items appeared to have been removed. The horses were missing too, which surely meant they'd been unfastened by the coachman and brought to the nearest inn.

With a renewed sense of urgency, Matthew swung back into the saddle and spurred his horse onward at a gentler pace. He arrived at The Red Rooster after another few miles of riding, swiftly dismounted, and thrust the reins at the young stable boy who came to greet him. With foreboding nipping hard at his heels, he marched into the inn.

She had to be here. She simply had to. Because if she wasn't...

"I'm looking for the Duchess of Brunswick," he told the innkeeper in a tremulous tone. "Where is she?"



## Chapter Nine

SARAH WAS JUST STEPPING out of her bath when the shouting began. She glanced at Anna. It sounded as though a lion was on the loose downstairs. She dried off, put on a clean chemise, and was about to let Anna assist her with her stays when a roar, sounding much like a name, gave her pause.

Surely she must have misheard.

Surely her husband would not be here looking for her.

Surely—

“Sarah!”

Feet pounded on the stairs.

“Sir,” another much fainter voice yelled. “You cannot go up there without permission. I don’t even know who you are.”

“I am the Duke of bloody Brunswick and I intend to find my wife!”

Sarah blinked. A fist pounded against a door a bit further along the hallway.

A female voice shrieked.

More pounding followed.

Sarah blew out a breath, put on the robe she’d discarded earlier, and crossed the floor. She was verily exhausted after the ordeal she’d been through. No woman liked walking several miles in a downpour after being tossed about in a careening carriage. And while her intention had been to find her husband, she wasn’t sure she had the energy for the furious mood he was clearly in. And what on earth was he doing here anyway when he was supposed to be at Sunderland Hall, or if not there then at one of his other estates? Nothing made sense.

Bolstering herself for what was to come, she swung open the door and gasped, because the man who stood before her looked like a madman who’d just fought his way out of hell. Drenched from head to toe, with uneven bits of beard protruding from the right side of his jaw, he stared at her with red-rimmed eyes conveying such anguish

her heart instinctively cried out in pain.

"You're alive," he rasped and she saw he was shaking. "I thought... My God, Sarah. I feared... When I found the carriage I..."

His hands came up to cover his face, perhaps in a futile attempt to hide his complete destruction. Unable to bear it for one more second, Sarah stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm all right," she whispered. "No harm has come to me, Matthew. The driver spotted the hole in the road and managed to slow the horses before we hit it. Come. Let's get you inside so you can dry off."

She felt more than heard his quivering breath right before she disengaged herself from his tight embrace and led him toward the fire.

"I will be in my own chamber if you need me," Anna said and slipped quietly from the room, closing the door as she went.

"You're in shock," Sarah said as she removed the greatcoat from Matthew's shoulders and began unbuttoning his jacket. The worry and anger she'd felt over his continued absence and the manner in which he'd left her were replaced by a desperate need to offer comfort, to ease his torment, and to help him overcome it. "The bath should make you feel better."

As soon as the jacket came loose, she pulled it down over his arms, shook it out, and hung it over the back of a chair before going to work on his shirt. Tugging it free from his breeches, she hefted it up and over his head and was just about to hang it over another chair when he grabbed her wrist.

Her gaze darted to his, the agony she found there so intense it made her gasp.

"I'm sorry," he told her with bleak sincerity. "Christ, Sarah, I'm so very sorry for how I've behaved."

She stared back at him. "Where have you been?"

His throat worked as if he struggled to form the necessary words. Withdrawing his gaze from hers, he appeared to study the floor for a moment before he finally said, "At Mivart's."

"The hotel?" Sarah shook her head, incredulous. "But that's...that's only a five minute ride from our house."

"I know."

"Your note said you had urgent business." Her voice shook with renewed pain. "You lied to me, Matthew, and then you left me. Why? I want an explanation."

"And you deserve one." He seemed to choke a little and when he met her gaze once more, she saw his eyes were filled with tears. "The truth is your love terrified me, because it made me realize that I could love you in return – that I *do* love you in return – and in my experience love can only lead to unspeakable pain. So I ran with every intention of shutting it out, of shutting you out, and of wrestling my

feelings for you back under control. But it didn't work. Instead, I missed you, dreadfully. Sarah, I'm sorry, so terribly sorry for how I've mistreated you. I can only pray you'll forgive me. Please, Sarah. I need you to do so."

"You hurt me, Matthew." She had to be honest too. No holding back now, no matter what. "I felt completely rejected, alone in a way I've not been since Claire died. It was awful."

"I'm sorry." His hands shook as he clasped hold of hers. "Please tell me there's hope for us yet. Please, let me do what I can to make this up to you, to prove myself worthy of your affection, and to convince you of my love."

"Will you share the details of your past with me?" she quietly asked.

"Yes. I've realized in recent weeks that ignoring a problem won't make it go away. One must face it, and even then, there's no guarantee it will ever be completely resolved. The loss I suffered as a child was overwhelming, but having you by my side, letting you share the burden with me as you have offered to do, will make it more bearable."

"More than that, it will bring us closer." Reaching up, she placed her palm against his cheek and swiped away a tear with her thumb. "You have suffered more than any man should. I know you fear it will happen again, and it might. Life gives us no guarantees. All I can promise is that I will do my best to fill every day we have together with happiness, starting right now."

She pulled him in for a tender kiss meant to soothe his soul, then whispered against his lips, "You're going to be a father, Matthew."



HIS BREATH CAUGHT IN response to the words. "Truly?"

"Yes."

A new sensation flooded his veins – warm and sunny, without the slightest hint of trepidation. His chest expanded and with it his heart, both filling with an abundance of joy so vast it threatened to slay him completely. Unable to speak one more word, he pulled Sarah fiercely against him and kissed her with thorough abandon, imparting his love, his regret, and the hope he now had for their future.

To his relief, she kissed him back, as if he'd not abandoned her for five weeks, as if she'd not had to suffer the fear of uncertainty he'd made her face, as if he'd not been an absolute ass. This was Sarah, and Sarah wanted to help and to heal. He could only count his blessings that he'd managed to make her his wife and that he somehow seemed to have gained her forgiveness for what he'd done.

"I love you for not giving up on me," he whispered while grazing

her neck with his lips. "For opening my eyes and making me face the truth. For simply loving me as you do."

"I shall always love you," she said as she helped him remove the rest of his clothes. "And I shall always do what I can to help you with whatever troubles you face. We're in this together now, you and I."

Her words were a balm to his soul, offering comfort in ways nothing else ever had. He needed her – an awareness that would have frightened the hell out of him a short while ago. Now it simply felt right. *She* felt right. And as he sank into the bath moments later and Sarah proceeded to wash him, he allowed himself to appreciate what he had: a wonderful wife to love and a child on the way. What more did he need?

"I really should ask the innkeeper if he has a blade I can borrow so I can finish your shave," Sarah said as she dried Matthew off in front of the fire. "You look like a heathen."

"Later," he murmured. "I've something else in mind first."

"Oh?"

Tossing the towel, he reached for her, because there was one more thing he did need, and that was to show her just how much he loved her. He'd been granted a lifetime in which to do so, and he meant to start right away.



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR taking the time to read the fourth book in my Townsbridge novella series. If you enjoyed *A Duke for Miss Townsbridge*, you'll definitely enjoy the sequel. Grab your copy of [An Unexpected Temptation](#) today so you can read Athena's story too! If you've read the first book in this series, *When Love Leads to Scandal*, you'll remember the Earl of Langdon. He's now the Marquess of Darlington and he has not forgotten the part Athena once played in ruining his future. But maybe it's just as well that he didn't end up with Bethany, because now, there's Athena.

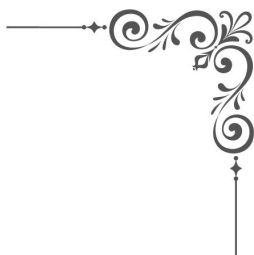
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Once again, I thank you for your interest in my books. Please take a moment to leave a review since this can help other readers discover my stories.

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# An Unexpected Temptation

## Chapter One

BALANCING AT THE EDGE of the sofa, Athena waited for her four-year-old niece, Lilly, to make her next move.

“Come on,” Lilly’s older brother, Lucas, said. “You’re taking forever.”

“It’s hard,” Lilly said. She stared at the low stool she was meant to get onto next. “My legs are too short.”

Athena had deliberately placed the furniture with this in mind. She knew Lilly could make the jump with ease, but after misjudging the distance between two stone benches in Hyde Park a few weeks earlier, the girl was fearful of falling and getting hurt once more.

Sympathizing, Athena grabbed a throw cushion and tossed it onto the floor. It landed between Lilly’s chair and the stool.

Lucas jerked toward her with a glare. “That’s cheating.”

“Would you rather your sister be eaten by crocodiles?” Athena asked. Lilly hopped down onto the cushion, freeing up the chair so Athena could move forward.

“No,” Lucas grumbled. “But she could have made that jump. And now she’s about to grab the treasure.”

“Unless you’re able to reach it first,” Athena told him slyly.

“Not possible,” Lilly said with confidence.

“What did I say at the very beginning,” Athena asked, “when you insisted there were no crocodiles in England?”

“To use our imagination,” Lucas said. His eyes suddenly widened. He seemed to study his surroundings with greater care. A grin widened his mouth as he eyed the folded blanket hanging over the back of the loveseat. “I’m making a bridge.”

"You can't," Lilly said. She turned to Athena. "Can he?"

"I can't very well stop him after I made an island pop out of nowhere for you."

"I'd rather play hide and go seek," Lilly grumbled. She crossed her arms and pouted while her brother triumphantly claimed the biscuit tin at the center of the room.

"We can do that next," Athena said. "After you have survived the pit of doom."

Lilly blew out a breath and leapt across to where her brother stood. Athena jumped forward as well, landing on the stool as the door to the parlor swung open.

"What on earth is going on in here?" Athena's mother, Viscountess Roxley, asked. Mouth agape, she stared at Athena. As it turned out, she was not alone. The rest of the house party stood immediately behind her.

"Playing," Athena told the assembled group. She and her entire family had been invited to spend the second two weeks of December at the Marquess and Marchioness of Foxborough's estate. The Foxboroughs's daughter, Abigail, had married Athena's brother James three years prior.

"That is what one does in the nursery, Athena. Not," her mother informed her, "in the parlor belonging to one's host and hostess."

"I'm sorry," Athena said, "but the nursery furniture isn't very conducive to jungle adventures."

"It's quite all right," Lady Foxborough said with a slight frown. "I'm sure we can put the room to rights quickly enough if we all lend a hand."

"William," Athena's oldest brother, Charles, told their sibling. "Help me move the sofa, would you?"

Athena hopped off the stool and picked up the blanket Lucas had used as a bridge. She proceeded to fold it.

"Do we still get our biscuits?" Lucas asked while hugging the tin.

"Yes," Athena assured him, "but you may have to share with a lot more people now. Unless you make a hasty escape."

Lucas gave the doorway a quick glance, then grabbed his sister's hand and promptly took off with Lilly tripping and squealing behind him.

"Honestly," Athena's mother sighed. "Could you not try to set a better example for them?"

Athena shrugged. "They can learn about rules and decorum from everyone else. From me, however, they shall learn how to have fun."

"Which is why we left them in your care in the first place," Charles's wife, Bethany, told Athena with a twinkle in her eyes.

"And we have every intention of doing the same with Benedict

once he's old enough," Abigail said. "So I hope this won't be the only time we're tidying up this room."

Athena shared a look with her mother. The lady's features softened until she allowed a soft smile. Athena knew she'd only chided her because she believed it was her responsibility to do so, not because she actually minded the ruckus. If anything, Lord and Lady Roxley both welcomed the boisterousness their grandchildren provided. As they put it, it made them feel young again. But they were very aware that this was not a view shared by all since most members of the upper class preferred to have their children hidden away and cared for by governesses.

"Hopefully, the weather tomorrow will be clear so we can get the children outside," Charles said once all the furniture had been put back in its proper spot and everyone comfortably seated. "A long walk and some fresh air would be wonderful for them."

A maid arrived with a tray, allowing tea to be served. Athena took a soothing sip while the conversation ensued around her. She loved that they'd all been gathered in this way. With her sister, Sarah, married off to the Duke of Brunswick in October, she'd experienced a void in her life she'd not been prepared for. All too often, she found herself reflecting on how things used to be before her siblings had moved out of Townsbridge House. There had been laughter and love, constant chatter, footsteps moving across the floors, the sound of games being played.

Now, there was too much silence, and Athena longed to escape it, to carve out moments for herself in which she could recreate what she missed. Only, there was no going back, just forward, and the future that spanned before her looked mighty lonely.

Of course, the solution would be to marry and have a hoard of children of her own. The only problem with this was that she wasn't sure she'd ever make a match for herself, as evidenced by her lack of suitors. No man wanted to touch a woman as daring or unpredictable as she. They couldn't accept the scandal she'd caused at the age of fourteen when she'd stood up in church and informed everyone that Bethany loved Charles rather than the man she'd been in the process of marrying.

Mayhem had ensued and Athena's reputation had suffered irreparable damage. But, she mused, she would do the same thing again in a heartbeat. For if there was one thing she could not abide, it was the idea of people sacrificing their happiness for fear of causing a scandal. As far as she was concerned, there was only one life, one chance to get it all right. Why waste that on making oneself deliberately miserable for the sole purpose of appeasing others?

"We have the holiday dance at the assembly hall of course, but if

you like we could arrange a ball here as well,” Lady Foxborough said, snapping Athena out of her reverie. “There are a few families in the area we could invite. A couple even have young men of marriageable age.”

“Really?” Athena’s mother murmured with far too much interest for Athena’s liking.

“Plotting the next match already?” Athena’s father asked with the resignation of a man who’d long since realized there was no point in trying to dissuade his wife from her goals. “You don’t waste any time, do you, dear?”

“I see no reason to,” Athena’s mother said.

“How about the fact that Sarah was allowed to wait until she was two and twenty before she married?” Athena asked. In truth, she wouldn’t mind finding a man with whom she could fall in love with sooner rather than later, she simply didn’t believe it was likely to happen and had no desire to suffer the torture of being paraded about. “I should be permitted to do the same.”

“All things considered, I think it would be best if we began showing you off to your best advantage as soon as possible,” her mother argued. “You’ve many excellent qualities, Athena. I’d like to remind people of that so they can start viewing you in a different light.”

In other words, her mother expected her road to the altar to be a lengthy one involving a shift in public opinion. No time to waste then. She allowed herself an inward groan and took another sip of her tea.

“Mama has the right of it,” William said. “And a ball would be a great deal of fun.”

“There’s just one catch,” Lord Foxborough said, cutting a stern look at his wife. “Protocol would require us to invite the Marquess of Darlington, and I’m not sure how any of you would feel about that.”

Athena’s hand shook in response to the name. Hot tea fell against her thigh. Robert Carlisle had been the Earl of Langdon when she’d last seen him. Although things had ended badly between them, she’d been sorry to hear of his father’s passing. Athena darted a look in Charles’s direction. He and Bethany had both gone utterly still.

“I forgot he had property in this area,” Athena’s father finally said.

“I’ve not spoken to him in six years. Not since I left him at that inn where I found him after...” Charles cleared his throat and clasped his wife’s hand.

Athena returned her teacup to its saucer with a clatter. “I should like a chance to apologize to him.”

“No.” The word was unanimously spoken by her parents and siblings alike.

“But—”

“Darlington was furious after what happened.” Charles’s voice was strained with regret. “He made it very clear to me that there was nothing more to be said between us.”

“Nevertheless, I would like a chance to explain myself to him directly.” What she was truly after was his forgiveness. Darlington had been Charles’s friend. She’d known him most of her life and while he’d been wrong for Bethany, she could not deny the guilt she still felt over how she’d upended his life. “It would mean a great deal.”

“I’m sorry,” Charles said. A brief silence followed before he confessed. “I made repeated attempts to apologize to him on all our behalves. I wrote him letters, Athena, and he responded once, in a manner I cannot repeat with ladies present. His words were extremely harsh, especially those directed at you. And while I’ve no doubt he was foxed beyond reason when he penned the missive, I cannot excuse such behavior.”

“Not even when we are the ones who drove him to it?” Athena asked. She held Charles’s gaze. “Out of everyone who has criticized me over the years for the part I played in your marriage to Bethany, he is the one with the most right.”

“You’re not wrong,” Athena’s father said, “but there are instances when it is wisest to leave the past alone and move on. It is my opinion that this is such an instance. Our goal right now is to see you settled, not to ruin your chances further by reminding everyone of what happened, and yes, they will be reminded the moment they see you and Darlington in the same room.”

“So then, I gather we ought to avoid a ball?” Lady Foxborough asked.

“What about the dance at the assembly hall?” Bethany asked. “Is there any chance Darlington might show up there?”

“No,” Lady Foxborough said. “The marquess, as I understand it, does not go out at all.”

“So then?” Athena prompted. “Why not invite him if you know he’ll stay away.”

“I fear he would not.” Lady Foxborough reached for her teacup while Athena tried to make sense of what she was being told. “The assembly hall functions are free from obligation but if we, the Marquess and Marchioness of Foxborough, were to ask another peer to join us for a formal event, I believe he would feel duty-bound to attend, so as not to cause offense.”

Athena sank back against the sofa with a sigh. What foolish nonsense. The Foxboroughs could not host a ball because to do so they would have to invite a man who did not wish to attend but would have to do so simply for the sake of appeasing a group of people who did not want him there. Once again, she was reminded of how

ridiculous Society was.

She glanced at the beveled glass windows, wet with rain. For six years she'd dreamed of running into Darlington, of voicing her regrets and wishing him well. In all her imaginings, he'd refuse to listen at first, but would relent when she persisted. Eventually, he'd tell her he understood, that it was all right, and that what had happened was for the best.

The only problem was, the marquess had cut all ties with her family and remained absent from Town. She'd had no chance to approach him – no opportunity to make amends. Until now.

Her pulse quickened. She wondered how far away his estate might be. If the Foxboroughs felt they had to invite him to an evening affair in the winter, he must be quite close – at least within an hour's drive by carriage. Pressing her lips together, she considered those around her. None would provide her with the directions she required.

Perhaps it was just as well. Athena picked up a biscuit and bit into it with a sigh. She knew herself well enough to realize it was probably a foolish idea – the sort of idea best scrapped before it fully formed and began to grow roots in her brain.

But when she got up the following morning after a restless night of contemplation, she accepted what had to be done. If she was to find true happiness, she would have to make peace with the man she'd hurt. It was the only way forward.

Resolved, Athena called for her maid to help her dress. "I need to know how to get to the Marquess of Darlington's estate. Can you please find out for me, Mary?"

The maid was silent a moment before she said, "Of course, miss, but if you're thinking of going there, I ought to caution you against it."

"Duly noted," Athena said.

"It really wouldn't be wise."

"You're probably right, but it's one of those things I cannot *not* do."

Mary finished fastening the back of Athena's gown. "Very well, but at least allow me to accompany you."

"Thank you, but you must stay here and cover for me. I'll be as quick as I can. I promise." It took a few more added pleas to acquire Mary's full cooperation, upon which Athena went to breakfast with her family.

"It's still cloudy, but at least the rain has stopped," Abigail said. "We could take a walk to the village and shop for Christmas gifts. I'm sure Lilly and Lucas would love the chance to purchase a few things for their parents with their aunts' and uncles' help."

"An excellent idea," James said with a loving smile aimed at his

wife.

Everyone else agreed.

“There’s an excellent tea shop where we can stop for pie,” Lady Foxborough said. “It’s the perfect place for us to warm up with refreshments.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Athena said, deliberately softening her voice to a weaker tone than usual, “but I am hoping I can be excused.”

“Excused?” Her mother gave her a baffled look. “You love fresh air and long walks, not to mention the chance to chase your niece and nephew along a country road.”

“True.” Indeed, she would miss that part a great deal.

“Unfortunately, I woke with a terrible headache. I think I would be better off staying here and getting some rest.”

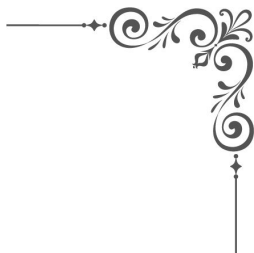
“Oh.” Her mother glanced about as if unsure of what else to say, except, “Of course.”

One hour later, Athena watched from her bedchamber window as her family set off on their walk. Bundled up with hats, scarves, and mittens, Lilly and Lucas skipped ahead until they reached the large stones at the edge of the driveway. Athena smiled when they scampered up onto them and Charles hurried over to give them a hand for support.

Stepping back, she went to her wardrobe and sought out her breeches. She always wore them under her skirts when she went outside in the winter. They added an extra layer of warmth she’d never been able to garner from stockings alone. And since she favored riding astride over using a side-saddle, they also helped avoid chafing.

Donning a heavy wool cloak and gloves, Athena listened to Mary while she told her how to reach Lord Darlington’s estate, then went to the stables and picked out a horse. Ten minutes later, she was galloping across the fields, determined to accomplish her task before anyone realized she’d even been gone.

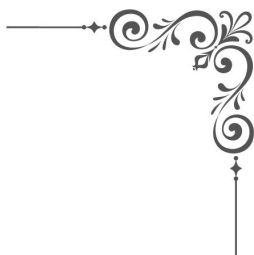
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## About The Author

BORN IN DENMARK, SOPHIE has spent her youth traveling with her parents to wonderful places around the world. She's lived in five different countries, on three different continents, has studied design in Paris and New York, and has a bachelor's degree from Parson's School of design. But most impressive of all - she's been married to the same man three times, in three different countries and in three different dresses.

While living in Africa, Sophie turned to her lifelong passion - writing.

When she's not busy, dreaming up her next romance novel, Sophie enjoys spending time with her family, swimming, cooking, gardening, watching romantic comedies and, of course, reading. She currently lives on the East Coast.

You can contact her through her website at [www.sophiebarnes.com](http://www.sophiebarnes.com)

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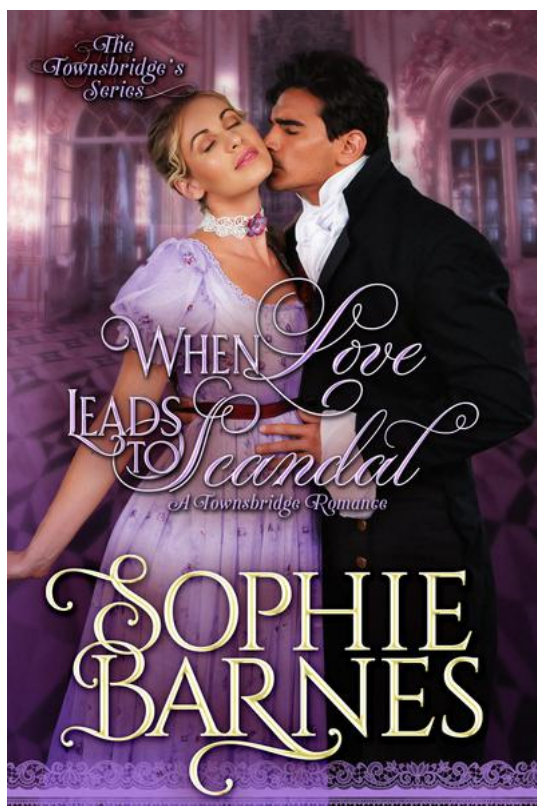
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***Two people fated to be together...***

Recently engaged to the Earl of Langdon, Lady Bethany is content with the knowledge that she's made a wonderful match for herself. Until a chance encounter with a handsome stranger makes her wish she was still unattached – a sentiment that grows even stronger when circumstance causes her to spend more time in this gentleman's company.

***And the duty that threatens to come between them...***

Charles Townsbridge is not prepared to learn that the mystery woman he met in the park, the very same woman he cannot get out of his head, is in fact his friend's fiancé. Determined to do the right thing, he tasks himself with quashing the attraction, only to discover that the heart cannot be so easily controlled.